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BY MAUDE MEAGHER

★

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WHITE JADE

BY

MAUDE MEAGHER

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TO MY FRIEND
FLORENCE AYSCOUGH

FOREWORD

In 756 A.D. a woman was hanged at Ma Wei, a village near the centre of China. The soldiers, who had demanded her death, jeered. The populace, who blamed her for the calamities of the time, execrated her. The Emperor Ming Huang, who had been her lover for more than twenty years, wept. At Ch'ang An, the capital city a few miles distant, the Tartar An Lu-shan was burning and pillaging. Lu-shan had also been the lover of Yang Kuei-fei, the Emperor's concubine, and had succeeded in driving her imperial lover from his throne.

Yang Kuei-fei dead, the Emperor spent the last broken years of his life in attempts to bring her back, if only for a moment. He refused to reascend the throne which was recovered for him by his son. In time he died of his grief.

Nearly twelve hundred years have passed

since Yang Kuei-fei hung dead from the branch of a pear tree at Ma Wei. She is still execrated, still adored. The historians and moralists of China condemn her as the woman whose beauty caused the apparent demoralisation of one of China's greatest Emperors, and threatened to destroy the T'ang culture at the moment of its highest development.

But poets worship her. In her small body were the seeds of dream, as potent after as before its death. They blow still across the mountains and deserts of the East, as thistledown dreams of Helen still drift from the Western sea.

What was Helen; what was Yang Kuei-fei? What, for that matter, is anyone, until the thought of him takes root, and flowers to the colour of the mind that feeds it?

WHITE JADE

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PART I

WHITE JADE

I

"YANG KUEI-FEI," said the man who was using his fingers as chop-sticks, "was a vixen, a harlot and a calamity to the Empire. Moreover she was unfaithful to the Emperor. All the world knew it. She deserved hanging twenty times, if once for each of the years in which she beguiled him — a thousand times, if once for each time she betrayed him. When at last she was hanged, a childless old woman of forty...."

"The Emperor hid his face in his sleeve, and shortly afterward died of grief," said the youth in embroidered silks who sat opposite. He moved to go, then resolutely leaned again across the table.

"You say you knew her?" he asked.

"I knew what all the world knew, that she was..."

"Yes. Your opinion of her is already

sufficiently clear," interposed Chü-i. "But what knowledge have you? My friend and I," he gestured toward a youth somewhat older than himself who was crossing the courtyard, and continued in a more conciliating tone, "my friend and I have adored the Western Empress Mother since childhood, and we have made a vow to learn of her from all who have so much as seen her. In that way, little by little we will learn the truth about her, the lovely truth about her who was loveliness itself."

The man rose and looked at the youth.

"I never saw her," he remarked shortly. "I tell you what all the world says, and what all the world says is true."

An elderly man who had been examining a tablet erected nearby to a Sui Emperor, raised his eyebrows at this and glanced curiously at the two. He wore a scholar's cap, but his clothes were of grass cloth instead of the usual silk.

"You are on a quest for the truth about a person whom all the world knows to have

been all that this man has said?" he asked gravely.

The man who had first spoken turned back to make the most of this apparent support.

"Because of that devil-woman ten million people lost their lives by slaughter and famine," he said vehemently. "Now, if there is any justice in the sky, she has become a fox. All lewd women become foxes at the hour of death. It is said that as she drew the silk cord round her neck in the post house garden at Ma Wei, a fox the colour of burnished gold, with nine tails, ran out of the courtyard, and there was left hanging from the limb of the pear tree only her embroidered robes of silk gauze, and her bright black hair and dangling shoes attached to nothing. These blew and whined in the wind and no one dared go near them."

For Chü-i, who was a poet, the sunny courtyard in which he stood became suddenly cold. Instead of the noisy crowds assembled for the Moon Festival, the food stalls, the fortune-tellers, the blind beggars

striking their gongs, he saw only a pitiful huddle of silk gauze swinging in the wind, and an Emperor who hid his face in his sleeve.

"You speak of the Imperial Concubine who brought the Bright Emperor to ruin?" The sharp aggressive voice made them turn to look at a necromancer who had been carrying on his trade nearby. "She was a fox. I know, for I too am a fox."

"Indeed?" said the man in the scholar's cap, turning to the newcomer with interest.

"All foxes at the age of one hundred years may become women if they please, or, if they choose, they change into the shape of wizards like myself," went on the fortune-teller assertively. "Now I, possessing all the power of magic, once came face to face with Yang Kuei-fei as she was being carried in a palace chair behind the Bright Emperor, who rode his white horse."

"If, as you say, you came face to face with the Imperial Concubine of the Son of Heaven," said the elder of the two youths,

turning away, "I wonder that your head still rests on your shoulders."

"I was not lacking in the attitude of respect," returned the necromancer hotly, "but I can see with the top of my head, or with my elbows, or with my feet. My whole body is endowed with sight."

"You are gifted," said the scholar, whose name was Chuang.

"All power of magic is mine," agreed the necromancer. "And so it was that I saw at once that the vanquisher of states and cities was a Celestial Fox. Having previously attained the age of a thousand years, she served in the courts of the Sun and Moon. While there she committed some fault, and was sent down to plague the earth."

"To plague the earth — you are right, old one," said the man with the chop-stick fingers. "Perhaps she was not a Celestial Fox, however, but Pao Ssŭ, the offspring of dragon spittle, whose demoniac charm lost Yu Wang his throne a thousand years ago."

"Yu Wang threw his kingdom away only

to make Pao Ssŭ smile for him the once," put in the elder of the two youths shortly. "If Pao Ssŭ resembled Yang Kuei-fei, Yu Wang's kingdom was well lost."

He walked away abruptly, followed by Chü-i.

"I cannot talk with people like that," he said apologetically. "The one knows nothing and only repeats what others say, and the wizard only seized upon the chance to advertise his own wares."

"You mind too much what people say, Li Mu," returned his friend. "After all, whom ever they describe, it is themselves they describe most clearly. And we have learned something in talking to those — fools or knaves, what does it matter? We have learned that the Western Empress Mother was a Celestial Fox."

Li Mu's face did not reflect the mockery in that of Chü-i.

"Perhaps she was," he said soberly. "I saw her once — have I told you, Chü-i? — I saw her once in a mantle of fox's fur, the fine

red and yellow fur collected from the ribs of foxes. Her face was golden-pale like the moon, and her eyes had glints of red and yellow in them as she leaned toward the Son of Heaven. He put out his hand and touched lightly the dark tips of the fur, and she shuddered and smiled again."

"I am envious of you, my friend," said Chü-i. "I should like to have been what you were then, a little boy called from the Pear Blossom Garden to play your flute on the terrace of P'êng Lai Palace."

"And I should like to be what you are now, your name inscribed on the Wild Goose Tower already, in spite of your youth; the favoured of the Emperor."

"I am too selfish to grant your wish," returned Chü-i, touching Li Mu's sleeve. "I think I will keep you what you are — my friend. Did you get the red candles?"

Li Mu produced them.

"I smell the incense from the burning Moon Palace at the gate," said Chü-i taking a candle. "We will light them there, and let

them burn to Kuei-fei's happy meeting with the Bright Emperor to-night.... Li Mu, are we the only people in the Flowery Kingdom who remember her with kindness?"

Chü-i's voice was clear, and the scholar, even if he had not been watching them, would have heard it. Neither of the youths had given him a second glance, but there was a friendly light in his slant black eyes that belied the mocking twist on his mouth as he looked after them.

II

ALL night under a September moon the Road of the Ancient Cedars had been a faintly yellow pathway blocked with shadow. Now in the early dawn the Sacred Flower Mountain to which it led lifted green perpendicular sides, in shape like a gigantic waterlily. A blue mist flowed downward from its fluted top.

As the moon thinned to transparency, the road became a river of blue-coated folk tossing a yellow foam of faces. They babbled and chattered as they walked, making for the temple at the base of the mountain. This was a rectangle of red walls, enclosing trees and curved yellow roofs. It was the fifteenth day of the eighth month, the day of the Moon Festival.

In the crowd that poured under the arch of the main gate was the commonplace figure of an old man, dressed like the poorest in faded blue cotton. As he entered, a clash of cymbals and a whining shriek of wind instru-

ments above his head made him wince away and look up angrily. There was a stage built over the gate, and on it a theatrical performance was already in progress. The old man clutched the silk-wrapped bundle he carried, spat and hurried away. The clown on the stage above flung some ribaldry after him.

Inside the rectangle the temple courtyard was divided into many walled compartments like a Chinese puzzle. The old man pushed irritably through the crowds until he came to a courtyard where there was comparative quiet, though even here the wind bells on the tips of the curving roofs jingled; birds chittered and sang, blind beggars struck their brass gongs monotonously, and a score or so of people buying their breakfasts at a row of food stalls at one side chaffered and gossipped. But there was a still lily pool in the centre of the court; some tablets to dead emperors made an illusion of quiet under a maidenhair tree.

As the old man stood beside the moon gate

in the wall his broad-brimmed straw hat threw a purple shadow across his face. This was the colour of Chinese amber, carved into deep wrinkles, immobile and sombre.

"Li Kuei-nien!"

The old man started as if an arrow had struck him between the shoulders. The purple shadow fled momentarily off his face as he whirled round in the direction of the voice. A beggar crouched against the wall. He did not look up as the other confronted him, but the hand on his knee unclenched and turned palm upwards.

Li Kuei-nien regarded him a moment and grunted.

"I have nothing to give you, oh beggar who calls names at random," he said, turning away.

"Li Kuei-nien!"

The old man turned back irascibly as the high-pitched voice rang through the courtyard.

"Do not call that name again!" he said sharply.

The beggar clutched at his coat.

"Venerable father, we have been silk-clad in the Pear Blossom Garden. We have drunk wine together," he pleaded.

Li Kuei-nien made an impatient gesture.

"Your wits are loosened by much hunger," he growled, and then, after a moment's hesitation, added gruffly, "I also have not eaten for two days. But I have here something that should wring from even these clay-eared fools enough to buy rice."

The beggar caught at the implied invitation and followed the other to the edge of the lily pool. There, with a contemptuous glance at the breakfasting people, Kuei-nien unfolded a dirty mat and laid on it the bundle he carried. A complaining *ping* of sound came from it as it touched the ground.

Then the old man sat beside it, suddenly as a marionette drops when its string is relinquished. For a moment he made no further move, breathing shallowly through half-open lips. His hands hung slackly down against his faded pantaloons, bely-

ing them, for they were not the hands of a coolie.

A man who had sauntered in through the moon gate and now stood surveying the milling crowds about the food stalls with, apparent in his face, the humorous speculation as to whether breakfast was worth it, saw Li Kuei-nien's relaxed hands. Chuang's eyes lifted quickly to see the face above them, but he saw only a lowered straw hat, a threadbare blue coat, and again the hands. These were translucent and fine like old amber. Pale green veins branched downward from the wrist, and at the base of the thumb a pulse beat visibly, almost audibly, yellow as an oriole.

Chuang approached.

"Have you eaten rice?" he asked, using the form of salutation usual among poor people, but without troubling to change his scholarly intonation.

Li Kuei-nien did not raise his head.

"We will eat rice when my *p'i pa* has induced these earless fools to give us money to

buy it," he said surlily, and reached for the bundle beside him. Chuang glanced at the old man's companion who sat crouched on the pavement, his head low between his knees. There seemed nothing there to interest him, and his curious eyes returned once more to the beautiful old hands that were now stripping the cover off the *p'i pa*.

"Were the four-winged serpent of Hua Shan to crawl down the mountain threatening famine to the Empire, the silk strings of the *p'i pa* under your hands would send him back harmless to his caves," said Chuang provocatively.

This time the old musician raised his head for a fraction of a second, long enough to send a suspicious glance at the other, noting his scholar's cap, his coarse clothes.

"What is my music to you who have not heard it, Oh official without a post!" he growled and bent his ear over the strings he was experimentally twanging.

Unperturbed, though disappointed in his

hope of provoking the old man to show his face, Chuang watched the amber fingers press the moon-studs of the instrument, and slide along the tightening strings with faint whining sounds. In his slant eyes was the fine expectancy to be seen in the face of a connoisseur who watches the unwrapping of some precious thing. He noted that the *p'i pa* itself was a fine one, set with *ch'i lin* — the Chinese unicorn — carved in milky jade. Its cover was of heavy silk embroidered with silver crested love pheasants and galloping *ch'i lin* in silver thread. It was stained and dusty. Casually his glance strayed to the silent companion of the old musician. Chuang started as he recognised him.

"You and your companion have been long tied with the silken bond of friendship?" he inquired of Li Kuei-nien.

The latter grunted. "Long enough," he returned drily. "The kinship of empty bellies is established in a moment. And now," he added, dropping into formal phrase and intonation incongruous with his appearance,

"if your esteemed erudition will step a little to the side, I will see if the sky can be made to rain square-holed brothers to the sound of my strings."

Chuang did as required, glancing idly from the sky to the pavement as if he visioned the hard blue above falling in jingling drops of copper cash.

The old man's fingers plucked precisely at the strings, but at the first words he sang Chuang frowned. Li Kuei-nien had assumed the finicking intonation of the street singer, and his song was a popular ballad by Wang Wei called "The Maid of Lo Yang."

"The maid of Lo Yang looked out of her door,
In her face you could see she was fifteen or more.

There came a fine youth on his courser so bold,
His meat it was served him on platters of gold.

For his scarlet pavilions her poor home she leaves
Where peaches and willows droop over the eaves."

The old musician cast a defiant sideways glance at the scholar and went on to tell how the maid lived thereafter in luxury and bliss

and had nothing whatever to do for it but to look beautiful.

Chuang's frown relaxed into a quizzical smile, and soon, as he half expected, the words of the ballad became no more than an accompaniment to fanciful variations allowed to grow out of the theme. At last the music no longer had any connection with the original tune. It was wild and sorrowful, and pricked through with sardonic humour. When in the end the flickering hands fell immobile across the strings, Chuang drew a long breath and nodded to himself. He had learned what he had desired to know.

Now the music had ceased, the noise of the people in the courtyard impinged crudely on the senses. They were clamouring and jostling about the food stalls, eating millet cakes and noodle soup with loud champings and sibilant inhalings of satisfaction. No one apparently had paid the slightest attention to Li Kuei-nien's music. The beggar beside him seemed as indifferent as they, his head bowed sullenly over his knees. His face had

taken on a greenish pallor, with dark blue patches under the cheek bones and about the mouth.

At last the old man started suddenly out of the absorption into which he had fallen. He drew a flat wooden bowl from inside his coat and placed it almost furtively on the pavement. Nothing fell into it. After a moment he raised his head just enough to see the blue-coated backs about the food-stalls. The *p'i pa* fell abruptly off his knees.

"Fools!" yelled Li Kuei-nien. The beggar, startled out of his lethargy, jerked to his feet with a scared face. "Mud-eared pigs! I play no more for you!"

The old man's voice split on the last word and rose in a comic wail. A child nearby broke into a crow of delight, tugged at his mother's coat and pointed. The woman fished a bit of pork from her bowl and put it into the child's laughing mouth.

Li Kuei-nien turned his head sharply away and began to pull the dusty silk over his *p'i pa*. His hands trembled.

"We should feel for them, venerable father," murmured Chuang, "for their preoccupation is the same as ours. If you will allow the judgment of a humble traveller to express itself, may I say that I have recognised the performance of a great master — may I say, indeed, of one who is unique in the Flowery Kingdom."

Chuang paused, but the purple shadow cut straight and motionless across the old face. It gave no sign. With a ghost of a bow, as though in courteous assent, Chuang continued, "My day is thus generously brightened. But our souls, however fed, are yet bound round with chains to our bellies. The discomfort of one makes the other suffer. Permit me, revered master, to make some miserable acknowledgment...."

"Words are wind," muttered the old man, "though I am pleased that one at least in this assemblage of pigs has ears washed and open."

Chuang, after a glance at Kuei-nien's companion, whose face, the colour of an unripe

lemon, had sunk to within a foot of the pavement — moved quickly across to a stall where twisted fritters and noodles were sold. As he waited his turn he looked ruefully at the smallness of his string of cash. Then, making up his mind, he turned and crossed to another where half his coins went for an earthenware pot of rice liquor.

"Words are wind, but wine is the light of sun and moon, directing and making beautiful the wind's course," he said, as he carried it back. "A drink of this will lift your friend's head, and may even, who knows, inspire him to speech." A thought struck him. "He is not one of those whose tongues were torn out for speaking slander of the Western Empress Mother, I hope?"

"No," returned Li Kuei-nien indifferently, "I have heard him speak, though not of her. It is not likely that he is an admirer of Yang Kuei-fei, however."

He reached for the pot of wine.

"You drink with us, beneficent elder?" he asked, and without waiting for a reply, held

the liquor to his companion's mouth. The man drank, and with a shuddering breath drew his hand across his forehead. Chuang, who had been watching the beggar's face with more keenness than solicitude, bowed ceremoniously.

"Later," he answered. "I beg you to excuse me till I have visited the food stalls. Then I will crave the honour of drinking in your company." Li Kuei-nien returned the bow, but gave no other sign that he noticed the deference with which Chuang had addressed him since his performance on the *p'i pa*. He placed the wine carefully on the ground without tasting it, and with slack hands and drooping head awaited Chuang's return.

III

Li Kuei-nien knew he had been recognised by the plainly dressed scholar, as by the deposed official Ying Wang, who crouched beside him in beggar's rags. His stubborn old lips set hard over the thought, and he pulled the brim of his hat lower over his face.

His mind, weakened by hunger, ran on in flashes that alternated with darkness.... Yo-wu Chuang in rich silks, the jade insignia of office tinkling at his girdle, discussing high matters of state with the Emperor Ming Huang.... The face of the Son of Heaven reflecting the humour that flickered on the lips of his minister. The Son of Heaven leaning familiarly and affectionately toward Chuang.... Chuang speaking to the Lord-of-All-Below-the-Sky in precisely the same cool tones of courtesy and deference as five minutes before to Li Kuei-nien himself.

What had happened to Chuang when An Lu-shan drove down from the north to wrest

the empire and the lovely Yang Kuei-fei from the Emperor? Before that madness of blood and wreckage the old man's mind dropped weakly off into darkness.... An Lu-shan lording it wildly in the Palace, forcing the ministers of the fugitive Emperor to serve him on pain of tortured death....

The huddled beggar beside him, Ying Wang, had served with alacrity, no doubt. ... Ying Wang in silks, bullying the eunuchs in the Palace of Intense Brilliance.... Ying Wang cringing to the Emperor, casting sly glances at Yang Kuei-fei... whispering that she had been drunk again last night, wandering with who-knows-whom in the palace garden....

The Tartar usurper An Lu-shan dead; his gross belly ripped up by his own son.... Kuei-fei dead.... Ming Huang dead after despairing months closeted with necromancers.... Had these been able to bring Kuei-fei back to him if only for a moment?... The Emperor dead, the torment smoothed out of his face, expectancy there like a lamp re-lit.

Himself, Li Kuei-nien, in silks, chief musician in the Pear Blossom Garden, one of the glories of the T'ang dynasty.... Ming Huang bending toward him with approval in his scholarly face.... His pupils — Li Kuei-nien's mouth tightened grievously as he remembered those rows of intent young faces leaning about their instruments.... A perfume near him; a voice like bells delicately carved in jade, "Li Kuei-nien, you will teach me that melody?"... Yang Kuei-fei....

Drums at the gate of Ch'ang An.... A yelling riot from the north led by the big-bellied Tartar.... His pupils in their bright garments scattering like flowers in a tempest. ... Little Yi Wing cut down, his pure child's face upturned, his hands still tight about his broken *hsiao*.... Yang Yeh, the silk torn from her immature body, dragged aside screaming into a summer house.... He had fought till a howling edged blackness struck him down... and later crawled away to live on in fierce contempt and bitterness.... Too old now to return to the capital city, though

Ming Huang's son sat on the recovered throne.... Too old, his voice broken, his fame fallen to dust that fools churned under their feet....

Chuang, returning with bowls of rice, bamboo sprouts and pork, bean curd and millet cakes balanced in both hands, found the musician brooding in the shadow of his hat.

"Here is food, venerable father," he said, spreading the bowls on the pavement and surveying them contentedly.

"I want no food," returned the old man, and twisted round till his back was toward the steaming comfort.

Chuang rubbed his chin and regarded the lowered straw hat. Then he squatted on the pavement and reached for the pot of wine.

"To give and accept nothing in return is the way of the proud man," he said persuasively. "You have given me music; I offer you food and drink. Do not refuse my return because of its inadequacy."

Li Kuei-nien took the pot of wine, stared

at it for a moment with memories still hot in his eyes, then returned it ceremoniously to the scholar.

"Drink first, beneficent elder," he said.

Chuang, with a conventionally deprecating gesture, drank and passed it back into the shaking hands of the musician. Beside them Ying Wang was already deep in a bowl of bean curd. The hand that was not occupied with this was curled round one of the pots of rice. With a flicker of amusement unnoticed by the straw hat, disregarded by the hungry man, Chuang rescued two of the largest bowls and set them before Li Kuei-nien and himself. When there was no longer so much as a crumb of millet cake left on the pavement Li Kuei-nien reached for his *p'i pa*.

"Now I will sing for the pleasure of the honourable benefactor alone," he said, and there was a note almost of friendliness in his strengthened voice, though he still kept his head stubbornly averted.

"The venerable old man honours me be-

yond my deserts," said Chuang. "Sing of vanished beauty, the Palace of the Bright Emperor, of Ming Huang and the glory of the T'angs."

Li Kuei-nien hesitated, then drew his hands slowly over the strings.

"I will sing you the words of Li T'ai-po."

At the name pleasant memories stirred in Chuang's face. Li Po had been his friend.

"Then we must first drink to the name of that valiant lover of the wine cup and the beauty of words," he suggested, and reached for the earthenware pot. It was empty. Chuang's hand touched his purse. That was alike empty.

He smiled. "For Master Po words were better even than wine. Sing his words, venerable father."

Li Kuei-nien bent his ear over his instrument and tightened the strings. Beside him the beggar Ying Wang slept among the empty rice bowls. The crowds before the stalls were dispersing as the people went about their mid-morning business. Whiffs of incense

drifted under the arch of the gate from the burning Moon Palace without. Chuang leaned against the sun-warmed rim of the lily pool and folded his hands in his sleeves as Li Kuei-nien struck his silk strings and began to sing, "The Pleasures of the Palace."

"The maidens are lithe as willows and the colour of yellow gold;
The famous old man* is snowy white like the flower of the pear.
In the jade two-storied pavilions the mated kingfishers are nesting;
In the jewelled palace hall the mandarin ducks are secluded.
The royal ladies throng about the elegant chair,
Singing they leave their places in the depths of the inner apartments.
Who is the chief of the ladies? Fei Yen, in the Halls of Chao Yang."

Chuang here interrupted with a comfortable chuckle.

"Yang Kuei-fei never forgave Li Po for comparing her in that verse to Fei Yen, the Flying Swallow," he remarked. "One can understand her rage.... Fei Yen entered the palace by way of a brothel or some such

* Ming Huang.

place, though by all accounts she was very beautiful and an exquisite dancer. Kuei-fei's own background was respectable in the extreme. Li Po was seldom so undiplomatic in his verses. But he was extremely drunk when he wrote these."

"If you wish music — listen to it. If you prefer to discuss the relative merits of the lately dead Kuei-fei and Fei Yen who became empress a thousand years ago, Ying Wang here can serve you better than I."

Chuang started and leaned apologetically toward the furious old musician.

"Your pardon, revered father. Thoughts of my friend had slipped into my mind. I beg you to continue your incomparable music."

Li Kuei-nien struck a few harsh chords and stopped.

"If you are one of those people for whom music merely provides a pleasant background for their own drifting thoughts I will waste no more time on you," he grumbled.

Chuang kept penitently silent. In a few moments Kuei-nien's fingers moved again as though by their own volition, and his cracked, inadequate voice continued the song.

"Strange to the district of Ch'in are the oranges bright in the trees;
Grapes are sent as unusual gifts from the Palace of Han.*
The flowers blend in the sunset and melt in a luminous haze;
Like wine in the wind is heard the music of pipes and strings.
The flute sounds a faraway call like a dragon that cries under water,
The notes of the *hsiao* drop down like a Love Pheasant dropping from heaven.
Many the joyous feasts in the life of the ruling prince;
In all the ten thousand districts the people are also at peace.

"There are trees of carven jade set in the royal halls,
There is joy in the golden rooms welcoming Spring's return.
In the rear apartments dawn has not entered to waken the ladies,
But two people† slip by through the night, drawn in a palace chair.

* The usual substitution of Han for T'ang in contemporary poetry.

† Ming Huang and Kuei-fei.

Laughter is heard, and words from among the
shadowy flowers;
Then swaying, uncertain of step, the lady sings
under the lamp.
O do not command the bright moon to depart!
Persuade her to stay, Ch'ang O, the moon lady,
drunken with wine!

"Within the embroidered doors the sweet-scented
wind is mild,
The colour of dawn is fresh against the gauze
window-panes.
The palace flowers in rivalry long to smile at the sun,
And soon the grass by the pool becomes slowly,
stealthily green.
Now are the dark green trees pricked with the
chirping of birds,
And posturing girls are dancing in towers of brighter
green.
This is the Palace Chao Yang in the peach and pear-
blossom month,
When the maidens in gauzy silk garments gaze on
each other with love.

"It is day; the sun comes in to fill the halls with
light;
Again the maidens wander as comrades with twin-
ing arms.
The wind of Spring throws wide the doors of the
Violet Hall;
Imperial music descends from the storied towers of
pearl.

All the beautiful dancers are skilled in performing
the Wu,*
And the pampered maids who sing are charmingly
awkward and shy.
They seem to long for the night, the perfumed night
of flowers,
But the palace women laugh, playing at hide and
seek.

"The cold snow is gone, but the plum blossoms
remain;
Among the willows the wind of Spring returns and
goes.
Orioles call in the palace, the girls are warm as with
wine.
The dartling swallows chatter busily under the
eaves.
Slowly the moving sun brightens the mats of the
singers;
Fresh-plucked flowers are caught in the robes of the
dancing girls.
At evening the royal lances approach with stream-
ing colours.
How lovely is Hsing Lo Palace! It glitters, it
trembles with light!

"Green and dark are the waters that flow by Nan
Hsun Hall;
Rosy red the flowers that grow by Pei Chueh
pavilion.
One can hear the oriole's song beside the T'ai I
Pool,

* Wu — a posturing dance.

And the singing silver fêng encircles the Y'ing Chow gate.
Ladies white as frost, their jewelled girdles tinkling,
Tossing coloured balls, are like immortals playing.
Delicious is the breeze that rises with the sunlight....
Let us enter Wei Ying Palace and wander for a while."

Earlier in the song two young men had come out of the temple to the left of the courtyard, where they had been burning red candles of happiness to the meeting of the Emperor Ming Huang and Yang Kuei-fei. As the old musician laid his hands finally across the strings of his instrument Chü-i bent quickly and laid some coins in the wooden bowl that still lay on the mat.

Startled, Li Kuei-nien looked up for one swift glance at the youths, then instantly bent his head low over his *p'i pa*, grunting an acknowledgment of the money.

"Honoured father," asked Chü-i, "did you know the palace your song describes?"

"I did," said Kuei-nien.

"Then — perhaps," hesitated Chü-i, looking doubtfully at the poorly dressed

figure, "you have even seen the Western Empress Mother?"

"I have," returned Kuei-nien.

"I have heard she played the *chêng* with considerable skill," persisted the boy.

"She played it like an immortal," returned the old man with unexpected fervour. "And the melodies she composed were clear as the sound of the jade ornaments of the immortals as they pass by, treading the empty air."

Li Mu had come nearer, and the boys now looked at each other breathlessly. Li Mu held out his whole string of cash.

"Old man, tell us about her."

Li Kuei-nien refused the coins with a brusque gesture.

"I need no payment to speak of music such as hers," he said sharply. "And what else should I know of the Imperial Concubine?"

Li Mu squatted impulsively down on the pavement beside the musician. It troubled him that he could not see the face above the

hands that had brought such perfect tones from the silk strings. But Kuei-nien, guessing his intention, turned his head so that the straw brim of his hat rested on the shoulder that was nearest the youth.

"Those are not the hands of an ordinary beggar," thought Li Mu. Then aloud, "Old man, will you not let me see your face?"

"What is my face to you, or anyone, impertinent boy," returned Kuei-nien angrily without moving.

"Your pardon, master."

At the boy's word the old man's shoulders sagged suddenly, then straightened.

"I will sing for you of the music of Yang Kuei-fei," he muttered. "What else should I know of her?"

For a moment Kuei-nien's hands fumbled on the strings, and the boy watched them keenly. Then, from under the hat the aged voice rose in an improvised poem called "The Music of Yang Kuei-fei." *

* This poem is from a popular play, written, however, only two or three hundred years ago. In the play it is given as an improvisation by Li Kuei-nien, as here.

"The lady in the lotus bloom pavilion
Delicately touched the strings;
She dreamed new sounds and played them
The Rainbow Feather Song* was one.
In the time of lingering daylight,
The maidens with knotted hair
Watched the white stretch of her fingers
On the rhythmic sandal wood.
The words she uttered clearly
From her bright lips and teeth.
Like the string of pearls that dangles
From the chin of the pure black dragon
Was the leisurely measure of sound;
Like the orioles and the swallows
As they play in the air, — '*Kuan! Kuan!*'
Like the ripple of a spring, like the rivulet
That flows in the hills among flowers;
Like the pure clear sound of the Sutras
Recited beneath the moon;
Like the call of the crane in the emptiness
In the high cold sky of Kou Ling;
Like the ringing of girdle pendants,
'*Shan! Shan!*' they sound in the night
When holy immortals are passing
In the spaces below the sky.
It is said that the Pear Blossom pupils,
And those from the School of Dancing,
Were drunken with wonder to hear her.
They lifted her high on their shoulders,
They lifted her up like a Buddha,

* The Rainbow Skirt and Feather Jacket was a famous melody composed by Kuei-fei.

High up on the kingfisher lotus,
Like a Buddha enthroned on a lotus.
Ah! She of the face like a blossom!
The lady of Yang, Yü-huan!"*

At the end of the song Li Mu spoke quietly.

"I think I know you, revered master."

"You do not know me, boy!" returned Li Kuei-nien testily, "I am an old beggar musician, playing my *p'i pa* for bread to people who will not listen. I watch them spend their money to fill their bellies and my soul has turned sour within me."

Unobtrusively Li Mu laid his string of cash in the bowl. But the old man saw. With an abrupt movement he tipped it so that the coins fell out on the pavement.

"You will accept nothing from me, my father?"

Kuei-nien jerked his head.

"Then I will make the only recompense left to me. If you will stop your ears that are accustomed to better music than any I can make I will see if some thin notes on my flute will make the people listen."

* Kuei-fei's maiden name.

"Play then, boy," said Kuei-nien in a stifled voice, his stubborn face low on his chest.

Li Mu took an iron flute from inside his coat and put it to his mouth. Chü-i watched him with affection and pride, while Chuang, with an expression of intense interest, leaned against a monument and waited.

But at the first notes of the flute Chü-i's face changed and became rigid. He glanced quickly over the almost deserted courtyard. There were no silk robes to be seen other than his own and those of Li Mu; no eunuchs from the Imperial Household at Ch'ang An; only the common people in blue cotton. Yet he kept an anxious eye on the farther gate lest some one in authority should enter, for the tune his friend was playing was "The Rainbow Skirt and Feather Jacket," the forbidden melody composed by the execrated Yang Kuei-fei on the first night of her union with Ming Huang.

As the passion-haunted notes shivered with ecstasy or glided in slow caress he for-

got his vigilance. All in the courtyard turned to listen. The women serving noodles and dried fish paused with spoons uplifted; a child stopped its wailing so suddenly that there seemed a vacancy where it had been.

At last Li Mu wiped his flute and put it again inside his robe. The silence still hung suspended. Then the boy stopped quickly, for in the shadow beneath his hat the old man was sobbing.

IV

"I WEEP with pride," said Kuei-nien, letting the tears run down his cheeks without concealment as he searched the face of the youth who had been his pupil in the Pear Blossom Garden. "In ten thousand years no one has played the iron flute as you play it, Li Mu."

"I am only your least pupil, Master Kuei-nien," returned the boy, wiping the old musician's face with his sleeve.

Glancing up he saw that several people had come near with small coins in their hands, and were hesitating, abashed by the presence of the richly dressed Chü-i in the group.

"Go away, brother," whispered Li Mu hastily. "You are too fine. Go away quickly."

Chü-i paused only long enough to drop some coins into the wooden bowl, and disappeared behind the maidenhair tree. Chuang

also sauntered to a distance without ceasing to watch. Li Mu waited till a little pile of voluntary coins had collected in the bowl, then picked it up and took it round to those who had not given, rattling it sometimes persuasively, sometimes menacingly before them.

As he returned Li Kuei-nien regarded him with an expression he strove to keep grim.

"Are you not ashamed, O celebrated Li Mu, to play like a common beggar?"

"I have always been proud to learn from you, master, and follow far behind in accomplishment." Li Mu set the filled bowl on the pavement and bowed deeply.

Li Kuei-nien's face twisted. He dragged down the brim of his hat again and sat rocking silently back and forth. Li Mu waited without speaking, his hands respectfully hidden in his sleeves. At last the old man looked up.

"What has your life been, my son," he asked, with a gesture permitting Li Mu to seat himself. "I know only your fame that

all the world knows. When I have remembered the coming of An Lu-shan my bowels have twisted with grief for all my pupils, but chiefly for you."

"I was young when the Tartars broke into the Palace," returned Li Mu. "My revered master knows how young. I hid, and afterwards escaped to a brothel outside the gates where they were good to me. It was a fortunate chance, for Lu-shan's soldiers did not loot the brothels. On the contrary, they made them rich. I played for the dancing girls, and escaped whenever I could to wander far up the Wei Water beyond the city, to dream of the Western Empress Mother and lament her death. It was there I met Chü-i, my chosen friend and brother."

"By his rich garments one guesses him to be of those whose names are written on the Tower of the Wild Geese. He seems very young," said Kuei-nien.

"He is young but very learned, revered father," returned Li Mu. "When we had

sworn brotherhood I went to live in his house. Now he has passed his examinations, and waits to be given an official post. Meanwhile we are travelling together, seeking ancient traces."

For a time the two were silent. The old man's eyes never left the boy's face.

"It was the melody I have just played that brought us together," mused Li Mu. "I dared not play the 'Rainbow Skirt and Feather Jacket' in the city of Ch'ang An, so I used to play it in a willow grove far up the river. Sometimes I made new melodies to honour the beauty that was gone."

"Making new beauty in its place," said Chuang, who had rejoined them. "Such grief is not contemptible. It is indeed the only kind one can wholly respect."

Li Mu looked up at him abstractedly, but Chü-i glanced his way with friendly comprehension as he took up the story.

"I heard his music before I saw him," he explained. "I was walking one day along the river bank, reciting old poems and think-

ing it would be better to be a vagabond, mind and body free, than a candidate as I then was for the state examinations, when from behind a clump of willows I heard the small sound of a flute of grief. 'Some woman who bewails her lover,' I thought, and stopped to listen. The reason seemed to me small, but the music was good."

"When I put away my flute and started back to the city I saw him on the bank, lying on the grass in the bright silks of a candidate," Li Mu continued. "I was startled, for I feared he might report my playing of forbidden music. But when he raised his head there was such beauty in his face that I knew there would be love between us and eternal friendship."

"We made a vow that although all the rest of the world might hate Yang Kuei-fei, we two would adore her," said Chü-i, "and every year since then we have come together to burn happiness-candles on the day of her meeting in the sky with the Bright Emperor."

Ying Wang had wakened unremarked, and here added his word.

"You could have chosen a better basis for your friendship," he said, and as Chü-i turned to him questioningly, he added with contempt, "you are too young to have seen her. And you talk like a youthful fool."

Chü-i's face set.

"It is possible you have seen her often," he said, "and yet are farther from the truth about her than I, who know only what my brother has told me of her."

> *"Truth bears not one name only*
> *The Sage is not one person only."*

Chuang quoted an edict of T'ai Tsung, the founder of the T'ang dynasty a century and a half before.

Ying Wang turned on him.

"The truth is that which can be proven," he said. "I will tell you the truth about Yang Kuei-fei, and if these infatuated boys are displeased, let them never again say they wish to know the Imperial Concubine as she was."

"The truth can never be proven," remarked Chuang. "Nevertheless facts are useful in small ways. Tell us what you know."

"Yang Kuei-fei was the daughter of a noble family," began Ying Wang. "When she was fifteen..."

Chü-i interrupted.

"Speak first of the marvellous portent on the night of her birth," he demanded, "when a great star curved above her mother's chamber, shaking over the house a glory of coloured fire that could be seen for many hundreds of li."

Ying Wang looked at the boy for a moment.

"It is indeed said," he returned at last, "that there was such a bursting star above the Yang household on that night. Now it is well known that the hu — the tiger — lord of all ravening beasts, is born of a falling star. When five hundred years old he becomes white, for by then he has learned all the wiles of death and life. Yang Kuei-fei

was such a milk-white tigress. That bursting star was an ill portent."

Ying Wang glanced about him triumphantly, scowled at the lift of Chuang's eyebrows, and continued.

"I say only what can be proven true. By the time she was marriageable, Kuei-fei — or to give her her childhood name, Yü-huan — was brilliantly educated. She had, it cannot be denied, exceptional gifts of mind. She had also great talent in the composition of music and poetry, and in singing and dancing. Her beauty was startling. She was guarded with great care.

"At fifteen she was married to Prince Shou, the eighteenth son of the Emperor Ming Huang. A few years later the Emperor saw her bathing in the sulphur springs of Li. As her attendants helped her to leave the water, drawing about her a robe of open-work silk gauze, her body was seen to be very white. There was a luminous quality in her flesh. The Emperor desired her."

"Her body," murmured Chü-i, "was like an altar lamp carved of clear white jade."

"The Emperor desired her," resumed Ying Wang impatiently, "and it was conveyed to Prince Shou that he would be well advised to divorce his wife. This he did, and she retired for a time into a Taoist convent. There the Emperor visited her, and shortly afterward the ambitious little schemer..."

"Why do you call her that!" cried Chü-i hotly, "she'd done nothing so far but what she was obliged to do."

"Tell a plain tale," said Li Mu, "without comments. We'll not interrupt your facts."

"In a notably short space of time, then," said Ying Wang distinctly, "Yü-huan was wearing half the robes of an empress. It is said that the Emperor preferred her when wearing considerably less than that; in fact, she is reported to have ensnared him by a way she had of strewing her garments one by one on the floor till only her hair ornaments were left."

"It must have been a good trick to hold

the Emperor for twenty years," remarked Li Mu shortly. "Strange none of her three thousand rivals in the women's apartments thought of it. Get on with your facts."

"From the convent Yü-huan was received at the palace as Yang Kuei-fei — Imperial Concubine of the Yang clan. The clan came too. Her three sisters were each presented with provinces and ennobled as Han Kuo, Kuo Kuo, and Ch'in Kuo. Her cousin, Yang Kuo-chung, later was made Prime Minister, for no merit but his relationship to her. Her three sisters and two brothers established the five famous households of Yang for which the Empire was beggared.

"When they accompanied the Emperor on some royal progress you could anticipate them far off by the scent of their sandalwood chariots. They had no shame, and rode bare faced without screens, their chariots often lashed two by two. You could trace them along the road by the hair ornaments and even jewelled shoes they dropped in their drunken revelry.

"Each of the sisters was allowed annually a string of a thousand cash for powder and paint alone. In Kuei-fei's palace, called P'êng Lai, after the abode of the immortals in the Jade Grey Sea, seven hundred women continually wove brocade and embroidered silks. Several hundred more carved amber and ivory, rhinoceros horn, crystal and jade, and made ornaments of gold and silver.

"Such were the magnificent Five Households of Yang as I have often seen them. Where are they now?" Ying Wang broke off suddenly, looking round him with a snarl.

V

"WHERE are the 'Magnificent Five Households of Yang,'" Ying Wang repeated, looking more ragged and meagre than ever as he brought the attention of his hearers back to himself from the splendours he described. "Dead with their children, their lovers and their servants. Where are the lovers of Kuei-fei? Dead. Where is An Lu-shan, the big-bellied Tartar, chief among her lovers, whose relationship to herself she scarcely troubled to keep secret from the Emperor? Dead, his gross belly ripped up by his own son as he lay wallowing on his bed.

"The pretty lady Kuo Kuo—" Ying Wang spat, "Kuei-fei's little sister who would not wear paint like a decent woman but went about with her face naked; who went galloping about the Palace grounds on horseback like a man; joking familiarly with the Emperor as no man would dare to do; striding like a man, not finicking gracefully

like a woman; who made no secret of her innumerable lovers...." Wang stopped for breath and added, "Where, I ask, is the lady Kuo Kuo? Dead — and fittingly dead at the hands of common soldiers."

"That is not quite true," said Li Mu, interposing resolutely, "Kuo Kuo killed herself. I was told by a coward who watched and dared not lift his hand to help her."

"When Kuei-fei hung dead from the branch of the pear tree and they saw the Emperor helpless, and their cousin Yang Kuo-chung lying butchered in the road, Kuo Kuo, her sisters and Yang Kuo-chang's wife sprang on their horses and fled. Kuo Kuo had her two children before and behind her.

"After galloping for miles their horses dropped in a bamboo grove. Yang Kuo-chung's wife said, 'Kuo Kuo, kill us before we fall into the hands of the beasts that pursue us.' So Kuo Kuo took the sword she wore, and while her sisters stood before her with hands clasped and necks bowed, she struck them down. Her two children were

frightened, and would have run away, but she caught them and cut them down under her hand with face set hard. She killed her horse too, that was a dappled grey as though painted all over with flowers. The Emperor had given it to her, and she loved it. Then she turned the sword on her own throat, but the foremost of the pursuing soldiers struck it from her hand.

"She turned on him in such fury that he stepped back, surprised that she could speak with that deep gash in her throat.

"'Are you soldiers of the State, or are you bandits!'

"The soldier answered her meaningly.

"'There *are* bandits, but we are soldiers of the State,' and recovering his courage, he made again to take her.

"Then the blood clotted in her throat and she died. So, in the end, she escaped him."

A crow of enthusiasm came from Chü-i as the account ended, but Li Mu was sombre.

"You are glad of her triumph, brother, but I think only that she is dead. I saw her

often in the Palace grounds. It is true, as Wang says, that she would not paint her face. Therefore her face was unlike those of all the other Palace women. Mei Fei, the concubine whom Kuei-fei displaced, painted her eyebrows in the shape of cassia leaves, broad and short, up-ended. It gave a quaintness to her wistful little face. Kuei-fei's eyebrows were painted long and fine, like willow leaves. The Emperor loved them, but she would have been as lovely if she had painted them square. Her beauty was intangible — eyebrows, mouth and hands were only decorations on something already complete.

"But Kuo Kuo's eyebrows, unpainted, were like neither willow nor cassia leaves. They were the wings of swallows in strong flight. Her face was the colour of a tea rose. Others painted themselves white in imitation of Kuei-fei, whose magnolia white skin was natural and unusual.

"Kuei-fei's mouth was strange, and even when she smiled, or when she was hilariously drunk its curves were the curves of dream.

But Kuo Kuo's mouth, with its little strong teeth, was frank and laughing. She would not perform the Wu dance, and when the Palace maids led by her famous sister were swaying gracefully in their long sleeves, she would turn her back on them, leap on her horse and race madly about the Palace grounds, her dwarf eunuch groom panting behind her.

"It is true she had innumerable lovers. Another woman would have tried to keep this secret, and so put herself at the mercy of the eunuchs in the Palace. But it was no use threatening a woman with exposure who cheerfully exposed herself."

"Shameless," said Wang with conviction.

"Yes, she had as little use for shame as for paint," agreed Li Mu.

"Shameless like her sister," added Wang. "Ming Huang, the poet, the scholar, the great constructive Emperor whose name will be praised ten thousand years hence, was Yang Kuei-fei's devoted lover. He was so faithful to her that he cared nothing for the

three thousand women who lived in the Palace in the hope of giving him pleasure. For more than twenty years this one woman was the sole object of the Bright Emperor's love. How did she repay him? This exquisite lady, made, as this romantic boy here has said, of pure white jade — had for many years a great coarse lout of a Tartar as her secret lover; An Lu-shan."

Ying Wang regarded the downcast faces of the two youths with satisfaction. What he said was a fact. They could neither deny nor explain it.

"An Lu-shan," continued Wang, "had been defeated in a campaign against the Tartars of the north. He was sent to the capital for decapitation. He was brought before the Emperor for formal sentence, and before he had been ten minutes in the throne room the whole court was rocking with laughter. A giant of a man, his performance of the *k'o tou* was indescribable. Added to this, he had no idea whom to bow to, and being apparently too stupid for awe, he had

some ludicrous explanation ready for each new mistake he made. Even the Emperor lifted his hand to hide a smile. The ladies were tittering unrestrainedly in their sleeves. It ended with the Emperor setting his seal to his own future destruction. He pardoned the clumsy lout in order to keep him as a sort of court fool. He was indeed a strange phenomenon in that elegant, perhaps one might say decadent, assemblage.

"Lu-shan never forgot the rôle which had saved him. When attending the fine scholarly figure of the Emperor he was like a huge ape gambolling good-naturedly. No one noticed in that clownish head the still, intent eyes of a man who waits his time. Perhaps Kuei-fei did....

"The lascivious sideways glance of Kuei-fei dwelt on the huge limbs, the thick beastly mouth of the Tartar.

"'Shall we take this queer fellow to be our adopted son?' she suggested.

"The Emperor agreed as to an excellent joke, and thereafter Lu-shan went familiarly

about the Palace. He knew the hours when Ming Huang reluctantly left Kuei-fei's side to attend his Councils of State. He was there when she came rosy from her bath, and a smile touched her mouth when she saw his eyes upon her."

Ying Wang spat again. The two youths, their misery apparent in their faces, looked at the ground. Chuang listened impassively. Li Kuei-nien had long been dozing in the sun.

"Soon all the Palace knew," continued Wang.

"Was the Emperor aware also?" asked Chü-i.

"Who knows? He could not admit that she had betrayed him unless he was willing to have her tortured to death, as was fitting. Yang Kuo-chung knew, at any rate, and knew also that the little Kuo Kuo, whose jealous lover he was despite their relationship, received Lu-shan among others. So he persuaded the Emperor to send the Tartar away. Ming Huang gave him three armies

and ordered him north to defend the frontier. To that extent had the great Emperor Ming Huang become bemused. Naturally, as soon as he was sure of his men, Lu-shan turned his armies back upon the capital and drove the Emperor out."

"And the sole possession the Son of Heaven took with him was Yang Kuei-fei," put in Chü-i. "He had no time to snatch up any of his treasures, but he led Kuei-fei by the hand. The others of his immediate household followed as they could."

"Infatuate to the last," agreed Ying Wang. "They fled westward till in the early morning they reached the post-house at Ma Wei..."

"I can't understand it," interrupted Li Mu suddenly. The others looked at him inquiringly.

"His taking Kuei-fei?" asked Wang.

Li Mu shook his head.

"Oh no. I can understand that if you can't. But we have every proof that Ming Huang was an exceptionally intelligent man;

supposing him really ignorant of the wrong Lu-shan had already done him, how could he have trusted that Tartar with armies!"

"Intelligent people are often fools in obvious ways," returned Wang sententiously. "They are apt to under-estimate the intelligence of others. Ming Huang thought Lu-shan a fool, though he knew he was a good fighter. When have soldiers needed brains? Lu-shan unfortunately had just enough brains to conceive the obvious — which Ming Huang overlooked. Besides, no doubt he thought the fellow was grateful to him."

"Of course," said Chü-i, "the Emperor's mind had become subtle and over-refined in an atmosphere of culture and peace. Ordinary human precautions that one must take with a barbarian wouldn't have occurred to him. Let the story go on, Li Mu."

"At Ma Wei the few soldiers who were with the Emperor's party rebelled. 'It is Yang Kuei-fei whom the Tartar wants,' they said, 'Yang Kuei-fei who has brought

us to this disaster.' They told the Son of Heaven that they would no longer protect him unless he gave her into their hands. They cut down Yang Kuo-chung, her kinsman and the Prime Minister, in the road before the Emperor's eyes. And they stood glaring at the devil-woman whose lover was despoiling the city behind them. The Emperor was helpless."

"Then the Western Empress Mother took a white silk cord from her garments," said Li Mu softly, "and knotted one end round the crooked branch of a pear tree that stood near. 'I will die lest the Bright Emperor's safety be endangered,' she said, 'but let no one touch me.' I think she smiled at the Son of Heaven, whose sleeves were wet with his tears."

"Then," said Wang briskly, "she hanged herself, because she knew that a worse death awaited her at the hands of the soldiers whatever the Emperor might decide. If, as they threatened, they left him to his fate, how could he protect her?"

"You deny her this one sacrifice?" asked Chuang curiously.

"I speak man's truth, not the maundering of love-sick boys," returned Wang.

"Tell him," cried Chü-i, turning his unhappy young face toward the scholar, "that his man's truth is false. You knew the White Jade Lady, I think?"

"I knew her," said Chuang, "and all that this man has said can be proved except her thoughts as she knotted the silk cord round her throat. These no man can know. She betrayed the Emperor with the Tartar. This is so. For love of her Ming Huang, who had been great and wise, a scholar and a poet, became — simply the lover of Yang Kuei-fei."

"So," said Wang, "you admit that these boys are moon-struck fools; that what I have said is the truth."

Chuang glanced at him coolly.

"You have told the facts about Yang Kuei-fei. But facts have far less to do with the truth than is at times imagined. They

make useful sign-posts along the road to it, but all too frequently they stand in parallel rows, pointing in opposite directions. The efficient man keeps his hand over one eye, and follows one set only. The wise man notes all the sign-posts — and frequently fails to arrive at any goal."

A laugh behind him made Chuang turn. Instantly his face became quick with welcome. After an exchange of greetings he brought the newcomer, a carelessly dressed middle-aged man, over to the group.

"This is my friend Chiao Sui," he explained with a friendly glance at the downcast youths. "He was one of the Eight Immortals of the Wine Cup, and was an official in the Palace while Yang Kuei-fei was there."

At mention of the Eight Immortals of the Wine Cup, that ribald group of poets that had roamed China under the bibulous leadership of Li T'ai Po and Prince Li Chin, the two youths rose to their feet with eager respect. Chiao Sui's cap was askew, and his

dress, a richly embroidered garment of kingfisher-blue silk, was rumpled and reeked of the wine shop. He said nothing, shifting awkwardly from one foot to the other.

"My illustrious friend dares not attempt to speak unless he is drunk," explained Chuang joyously. "When he is sober he stammers and sulks.... These two honourable youths," he added to Chiao Sui, "are worshippers of the Western Empress Mother. If we go to an inn nearby, where I know the wine is good, you shall have, if you will speak of her, a more rapt and breathless audience than ever listened to your poems.... But you," he finished suddenly, "or they, must pay, for I have not a single cash. Who goes with us?"

The two boys made an eager movement, but Li Mu turned back to the old musician, still sleeping in the sun.

"My foster brother and I have rooms at the inn by the outer gate, revered father," he said, shaking the old man's shoulder gently. "Will you go there and rest till later?"

Li Kuei-nien looked up at him.

"I will go, my son. I must hear your flute once more before I die."

"You will hear it many times, my father, for Chü-i's parents will be proud to welcome you to our home."

Kuei-nien paused only long enough to give a handful of the coins in his bowl to the sullen Ying Wang, and went down the courtyard.

Li Mu hurried after Chuang and his poet friend, who were attended by the eagerly listening Chü-i. Chuang was expounding his views on truth.

"Facts are useful small things to have in the hand," he was saying, "but like any other weapon, they are dangerous in the hands of the man without conscience. If you seek truth, I warn you do not dispute with the conscienceless man who has a heap of them within reach. He may seize one and fell you with it. Nor is there any wisdom in providing yourself with a similar heap. So far from being a search for truth, your affair

would become a simple question of mathematics. He who had the largest heap would win. Next day, if pertinacious, you might come back with more facts and win in your turn. Such battles are endless and lead no where except to exhaustion. Certainly not to truth. Truth must be sought with humility. Fragments of it may sometimes be found under an unpromising heap of lies. It is seldom found by the proud man who spends his energy in continual challenges to pointless and inconclusive battle."

Chiao Sui bowed in polite agreement, but there was a gleam in his opaque black eyes. Apparently he had heard his friend on this subject before.

"The humble man can be made to look a fool by any fool with sufficiently aggressive self-confidence," continued Chuang, gesturing. "It is not by the readiness of his tongue that the wise man may be judged. He..."

At this point Chiao Sui made a sound, one well known to school boys. It was only

a little sound, not loud enough to get one into trouble with the master, but full of expression. Chuang had made use of that sound himself on occasion; when he had been some fifty years younger. He looked sharply at Chiao Sui. But the homely red face of the poet betrayed nothing. It betrayed, in fact, too precisely nothing.

"Here is the wine-shop I promised you," said Chuang hastily. "Let us order wine at once, my friend, that the odds of loquacity may be equal."

PART II

I

A Cassia tree drooped above the wide terrace of the inn and beside its trunk a lacquered table about two feet high had been set. Chuang called the diminutive serving boy, who brought an earthenware pot of heated wine, and four tiny wooden cups. The courtyard at this hour was deserted. Above them the green calyces of Hua Shan floated in the lazy heat of mid-afternoon, and in a marble-rimmed pool nearby carp swam and lily pads spread above coolness.

"It is long since I last heard the eloquence of my elder brother," Chuang was saying, as with a ceremonious gesture he lifted his wine. "These cups are of wood, but we have drunk together, the elder scholar and I, from cups of white jade, or rhinoceros horn curiously carved, from cups of porcelain, rock crystal, wrought silver and gold."

He dismissed the serving boy, and refilled

the poet's cup. "Still, the vessel has no significance. It is the liquor it contains which loosens the bonds that impede my learned brother's stammering tongue. We have drunk together wine made of roses, of grapes, pears, apples, plums and lichis. The kind also is unimportant. This grain wine will, like the others, induce my elder brother to speak words fragrant as air fanned by the sleeves of the immortals."

Chü-i gazed respectfully at the round face of Chiao Sui. He had heard much of the group to which this poet belonged, "The Eight Immortals of the Wine Cup." Their leader was Li Chin, the eldest son of Ming Huang's elder brother, and heir to the throne. He had refused his inheritance, and, though created Prince of Ju-yang, preferred to call himself "Prince Ferment, President of the Board of Barm," in honour of his own stupendous capacity for drink.

Smiling to himself, Chü-i recalled Tu Fu's lines about him: *

* Mrs. Ayscough's translation — "Tu Fu," p. 84.

"He drinks like a long whale, sucking in the One Hundred Streams.
When holding a wine cup to his lips, he says,
'I rejoice in clear wine of enlightened men;
I fly moreover from the thick draught of virtuous worthies.'"

And of Chiao Sui, Tu Fu had written — Chü-i hummed the line with a half mischievous, half respectful bow to the poet across the table, "At five measures of wine, Chiao Sui becomes extremely eloquent."

Chü-i had not spoken, but had merely hummed the tones indicated by the words of the line. Instant recognition, however, appeared in the faces of the others. Chiao Sui attempted some remark, which the two boys leaned eagerly to hear, but a paroxysm of stammering cut it short. Chuang hastened to refill his friend's wine cup, no larger than a liqueur glass, and touched his sleeve familiarly.

"My esteemed brother has not yet had the five measures required for his illumination," he said. "His speech is now like a dragon caught in a tangle of weed at the

bottom of a whirlpool. Drink, Elder Brother, that he may rise glittering to the surface."

"My brother and I, insignificant youths, wait eagerly with ears washed and open till our revered elder shall have reached the degree of illumination required by the profundity of his thoughts," said Li Mu.

Chiao Sui, rendered moody by the failure of his attempt to speak, rapidly emptied and refilled his cup. Chuang, watching him with his air of cool detachment, in which now was an admixture of affection, spoke finally.

"Fools drink till their senses are annihilated," he observed. "They sink into the blackness where sun and moon and stars cease to be. But when my elder brother drinks the Wine Star shines more brightly at each sip."

Chiao Sui put down his empty cup and refused with a gesture the proffered flagon.

"When I, your unworthy elder brother, presumed to enter the courtyard beyond," he said steadily, addressing Chuang, "I thought I heard mention of the lady Yang Kuei-fei."

"These two illustrious youths are travelling together seeking ancient traces," Chuang assented. "But I think that while their minds are dutifully bent on visiting the shrines of sages centuries dead, their hearts seek rather the golden lilies that spring in the footprints left by a lady not so long departed from this earth, Ch'ang O, the moonlady Yang Kuei-fei."

"We hope our desire is not impertinent," put in Li Mu diffidently. "As a child I saw her, being called upon to display my poor talent on the flute in the garden of the Inner Apartments. It was the year before her cruel death. Since then she has been to me the light of sun and moon. And to my brother, also. Yet at her death there rose shouts of triumph and rejoicing from a myriad ugly throats. Can ugliness triumph over beauty? Was she wicked as they say? Was she in truth not beautiful?"

"If her beauty was a sham, my brother and I wish only death for ourselves," said Chü-i sombrely. "Even for me, who am too

young to have seen her, she has become the lambent centre of all beauty. But we are not afraid to know the truth about her, for my brother has seen her, where other men were blind."

"Where is truth but in the mind that conceives it?" said Chuang. "And where is the mind strong enough to sustain more than the least inkling of so tremendous a thing? One can remember vague stirrings as at a momentary touch of light; one keeps perhaps an instinct of the direction in which truth lies. But lacking cognizance of all things, known only to the judge that rules beside the Yellow Springs, can one hope to speak the truth about Yang Kuei-fei or another? Who knows another's heart, or even his own? For me, I say let all things pass. I watch them and seldom dare make serious comment."

The scholar slid his cup across the table until a trickle of sunlight that dripped through the branches of the Cassia tree was caught in it. Chiao Sui watched for a mo-

ment the sun impregnate the thin wine, then drained his own cup brusquely and spoke.

"The wisdom of my elder brother, the honourable Chuang, is wide as the space between the Jade Grey Sea and the cloud blue mountains of K'un Lun, and," he added, "it is sometimes arid and salt as the desert that lies by the leek-green river of T'sung. Though he wanders often in the lush meadows of poetry, no dew from them clings to his garments."

Chuang smiled, and the two youths composed their faces with a respectful effort.

"My revered friend," continued the poet, "would have truth a radiance dimly surmised beyond the tall grasses at the edge of the world. For me, however, truth is a beauty dispersed. Traces of it cling like a sheen on the curve of a petal; it is hinted in the lift of a hand; it lurks in the strong movement of a tiger springing from ambush.

"For Ying Wang, whose ambition made him seek for the shortest route to the accomplishment of his desires, truth was an

accumulation of facts. He was wise in his degree, but such truth as his is unstable, for facts follow upon one another endlessly, like a procession of ants. It requires much patience to consider them all, though their direction is easily determined.

"However, an accident sends them running in all directions. Such an accident happened when Ch'ang An and the Palace of Intense Brilliance were destroyed by An Lu-shan. Ying Wang was confused, and sits in his bitterness conning over his handful of facts. Such men as he find comfort in apportioning blame. They see themselves as deputies of the great judge who rules beside the Yellow Springs."

Chiao Sui lifted his cup into which a flower from the Cassia tree had fallen, and regarded for a moment the fragrant yellow thing that floated on the paler wine before he drank.

"Then you do not agree with Ying Wang, revered elder, that Yang Kuei-fei was a wicked woman?" asked Li Mu eagerly.

"The hearts of my brother and myself have been sore at the words of her detractors."

"What is her wickedness to me?" returned Chiao Sui. "She is dead. Even while she was alive, her beauty was enough. Let others if they could, curb her extravagance; deplore her unchastity if they would. Her beauty was a thing quite separate and an enrichment of the world. Why blame or praise her for it? It was the substance of which dreams and poems are made, as the raw silk from the cocoon is woven into openwork gauze of Yüeh and the flowered brocade of Shu."

"When did you first see her?" asked Chü-i.

"I was in the Emperor's train when he went to visit the Sulphur Springs of Li," returned Chiao Sui. "With his attendants the Above One sat taking iced syrups, frosted oranges and melons in a pavilion near the pool. The yellow dusk had begun to creep across the gardens, blurring the flowers into masses of half-distinguished colour, but light enough still lingered in the

jade green sky to glint across the tiled roofs of violet, rose and blue.

"Suddenly I saw the Emperor tremble, and followed with my eyes the direction of his look. A girl was emerging from the hot yellow waters of the pool, an attendant on each side of her. Her body, as they drew the silk gauze about her, was luminous and wavering as a rag of moonlit mist.

"Others beside myself had seen the movement of the Emperor, and Kao Li-shih, the chief eunuch, needed no telling to begin inquiries as to who she might be."

During Chiao Sui's account Chuang had been regarding him with an expression of shocked astonishment, which now changed to mocking incredulity. The poet, becoming aware of this attitude cutting sharply through the rapt attention of the youths, corrected himself guiltily.

"I should have explained that I was not really by the Springs myself. As a matter of fact all this was told me by a eunuch in the Emperor's company there."

Chü-i frowned slightly with disappointment, but Li Mu was oblivious, lost in his own thoughts.

"The lady, unfortunately, was the wife of the Emperor's eighteenth son, Prince Shou," continued Chiao Sui. "An eighteenth son is not important, however. The Son of Heaven rules all below the sky. The lady was divorced and retired for a time into a Taoist convent. One evening Kao Li-shih and other members of the Yellow Gate called for her there."

"I think of her moving toward the open moon door of the Emperor's apartment," said Li Mu. "Beyond it, on the great gold bed, sat the Son of Heaven, motionless in his dragon robes of gold brocade.

"The eunuchs placed a cushion on the floor, and on it the girl dropped to do obeisance. Even where he sat Ming Huang could sense the fragrance of her cloud-black hair set with jewelled flowers, bent lowly to the floor. His hand — a powerful hand the colour of pale amber — stirred so that the

gold sleeve fell away from it. The eunuchs, seeing the gesture, stiffened with surprise. For the Emperor had already dismissed them. They went backward swiftly, and closed the moon door behind them as the Emperor did what Emperors do not do; he moved across the room and bent over the fragrant hair.

"Then I think Ming Huang raised her to her feet," continued Li Mu on a breath, "and looking down saw the childish curve of her cheeks, the delicate upward lift of her lowered lashes, her eyebrows like the fine stretched wings of a bird. Her hand that lay in his was like a carving in translucent jade set on an amber stand. His eyes followed the line of it from the pale green veins in the wrist to the nails that curled backward a little like rose petals. He thought of the faint clear sound made by the silk strings of a table lute when it accompanies a love song. And then the amber hand curled over and caught the pale one closely, for his eyes had fallen on the pure outline

under her silks of the breasts he was to adore."

"From that time on there was no one among the three thousand women in the Inner Apartments for the Emperor but Yang Kuei-fei," said Chiao Sui. "She was created Kuei-fei, or Imperial Concubine, at once. The Empress had died some time before. He built a palace for her in the Forbidden Enclosure and called it P'êng Lai, for he dreamed that, like the immortals on the purple island of P'êng Lai in the Jade Grey Sea, he and she might love forever."

"I have heard there was a tiny enclosed garden beside P'êng Lai Palace, forbidden to all but Yang Kuei-fei and the Son of Heaven," said Chü-i. "It was closed by a round green gate in the rose-red wall, and in the centre was a green pool in which little dragons, hornless dragons, could be seen playing. Beside it stood a stork of ivory, each feather perfectly carved, and two cranes of grey-blue jade. Quaint ducks made of iridescent shells floated in pairs

round a moon toad on a jade rock of curious shape. The surface of the pool was bright with lotus flowers made of pink mother-of-pearl. A silver unicorn bent over its own reflection in the water, breathing incense from its nostrils.

"There was only one tree in the garden, and that was so old that it no longer bore leaves. Its gnarled branches had a wonderful intricacy and balance against the sky, so the Emperor had its foliage replaced by leaves made of white silk. In moonlight it was like a tree of carved grey stone with crystal leaves.

"On the mornings of feast days Yang Kuei-fei would find its branches hung with hollow fruits, each containing a gift from Ming Huang: a hair ornament in gold filigree; a crushed pair of tiny slippers sewn with pearls and turquoise and coral; perhaps a little figure of a woman in an attitude of the Wu dance carved in smoke-coloured jade; a delicate porcelain cup shaped like a flower; a dragon fly brooch with wings of

silver filigree; a gold box inlaid with pearl unicorns, jewelled peony flowers, or the magpies of happiness in black and white jade. There would be little scent and rouge jars carved in semi-precious stones; sometimes a pair of scissors with flying bird handles, or a delicate spoon of silver, its bowl shaped like a leaf. Occasionally an opened fruit would disclose a snuff box of cornelian or kingfisher jade. These Kuei-fei would present decorously to the Emperor as a gift from the Immortal Mother Hsi Wang Mu. And they would laugh, and the Emperor as a return gift would set in her hair some ornament, perhaps a pair of love birds sitting on a branch of jewelled flowers."

Li Mu looked up at the green chalice of the Sacred Flower Mountain. Small as ants the pilgrims could be seen toiling upward on the hanging path set in the precipice. A glitter at the top marked the place of the golden palace-temple of the White God that rides the milk-white dragon.

"Hsi Wang Mu is said to have come

once from her home in the K'un Lun mountains to the pool of the moon at the top of Hua Shan," he said, "though that was a thousand years ago. They say that when she came to the Market Place of the Mist she rode in a jewelled chariot drawn by a five-coloured dragon with nine heads. The chariot had a canopy of peacocks' feathers, and the Western Empress Mother herself wore yellow garments and a head dress of filigree gold. When she had bathed in the pool there grew up water lilies of jade. These are still there — they say — and they are cold as frost and sweet as honey. A small piece in the mouth will cure old diseases. Hsi Wang Mu left at last, glittering under her canopy of feathers, and attended on the left and right by golden youths."

"There was a sage who lived on Hua Shan many years ago," murmured Chuang, turning his cup under a needle of sunlight so that his wine twinkled. "This sage ate red clouds only, and so dreamed dreams."

Chü-i brought his eyes back from the fluted top of Hua Shan and looked urgently at the scholar.

"Dreams are good, revered elder," he said.

"Are good," Chuang echoed him assentingly.

A commotion at the door of the inn made them turn. The host, a fat and voluble man, apparently just wakened from his afternoon sleep, was scolding the serving boy ostentatiously.

II

HAVING secured the attention of the group under the Cassia tree, the host worked himself forward in a series of low obeisances. Apparently only his corpulence kept his forehead from the floor.

"This unworthy dog begs ten thousand pardons of the revered masters who have deigned to soil their silks in entering his pig-sty of an inn," he told them. "The imbecile who serves my guests shall be chastised; the bad spirits afflicted his parents so that he was born blind to the radiant worth of your excellencies."

During his expostulations the host had removed the earthenware wine jar and put in its place a tall silver flagon rather like an elegant coffee pot. Chiao Sui rescued his wooden cup and drained it just in time, before it was whisked away and replaced, as were those of the others, by cups of carved horn inlaid with silver.

"Deign, revered worthies, to drink from my despicable best," babbled the host, gazing out of the corners of his eyes at the embroidered kingfisher silks of Chiao Sui, and the young elegance of Chü-i. The insignia of high rank worn by Chuang had not gone unnoticed, though his eccentric garments of grass cloth were puzzling. However, voluntary retirement on the part of officials when they could not approve some point of imperial policy was common during the T'ang period, when, under the system instituted by T'ai Tsung, officials were primarily poets and scholars.

"I hope," murmured Chuang gently to Chiao Sui, "that my revered elder brother has sufficient to pay for this sudden grandeur?"

The poet, who had several times seen the earthenware pot replenished by the maligned serving boy, answered in some degree of exaltation.

"That, and more!" he cried. "Let him bring food on trays of gold; trout on platters

of crystal clearer than the mountain stream; cold melons with red-gold centres and seeds of black jade; pickled eggs a hundred years buried; iced fruits, and ginger that twinkles in the mouth; let him bring food worthy of an immortal of the wine cup!"

"My elder brother speaks wisely," observed Chuang. He turned to the host, "What food is prepared?"

The man dragged his fascinated gaze from Chiao Sui.

"If the revered and most venerable company will stoop to accept the despicable pig's food which is all I have, I can bring them dumplings with minced meat."

Chuang assented with a gesture, and the host, his short coat flapping behind him, flew toward the kitchen. During the past few minutes Li Mu and Chü-i had glanced at each other uncertainly more than once. They knew that the insouciant scholar Chuang was without a cash in his purse. Like as not Chiao Sui was in a similar state. Yet the laws of etiquette were very strict.

As young men they dared not suggest to their elders that they assume the place of host so far as payment was concerned.

The voice of Chiao Sui broke upon their indecision.

"Bring me the leaf of a lotus," he cried. "I will drink fittingly to the lotus flower of jade, the immortal Yang Kuei-fei."

Li Mu quickly secured a lotus leaf from the nearby pool, and put it into Chiao Sui's hands. The poet drew a gold pin from his hair that was knotted under his cap, and pierced the leaf where it joined the hollow stem. Chü-i poured wine into the green cup thus made, and the poet's sparse beard wagged as he sucked the liquor through the stalk.

"Thus drinks the simple man, the scholar, the poet, content with his hut thatched with red grass in the mountains; content for his music with the sound of the wind through the branches of the bitter bamboo; for food, green soup of herbs, for books and learning, the tracks of wild birds in the sand by

his threshold.... Do not tell me ——" he turned on Chü-i, "that the tracks of birds are without significance. They have a profundity measured by the profundity of the mind that contemplates them. I have read poems of the sea in the tracks of gulls, the foot-prints of sparrows chant of home. There is..."

Chiao Sui broke off as the inn keeper, with a flourish, set a finely lacquered bowl shaped like an immense red flower on the table. It contained the symbolic fruits always served at the Moon Festival; white lotus root, red water chestnuts, pears, persimmons, and dates. On a silver-petalled dish, thirteen moon cakes were arranged in a pyramid.

The poet surveyed them with marked irritation.

"All this clatter and noise," he muttered sulkily. "I was about to write a poem in honour of Yang Kuei-fei, perfect as the tracks of the Silver Crested Love Pheasant." He put down the roll of white silk which he

had taken from its case at his belt, and laid his bamboo writing brush beside it. "Now I cannot write till I have eaten, and after that till I have drunk." He pinched a persimmon to test its ripeness. "But poems we must have. Elder brother, I beg you to refresh our ears with poems of your own composing, worthy to be chanted in the Violet Inner Apartments by the voice of the circling Love Pheasant."

Chuang made a deprecating gesture.

"Your lesser relation has been cursed, or blessed, from birth with only so much talent as enables him to realise his own inadequacy," he said, "but it is evident that the illustrious youths who honour this table have precious gifts." He turned to Li Mu.

"My own poor talent expends itself in a few worthless notes on the iron flute," said the boy, "but my brother often makes beautiful the shining silk with birds' feet characters."

"I beg you to delight our ears, illustrious

scholar," said Chiao Sui. "Food is good, and drink is good, but the well-conceived words of a poet intoxicate the mind more than wine."

"My own immature verses are not fit for the ears of an immortal of the wine cup," returned Chü-i, "nor for those of a scholar whose jade girdle ornaments have been brushed by the sleeve of the Enlightened One. But if the honourable company will bear with my uncultivated accents, I will chant 'The Puppet Song' made by the Enlightened One himself, the Emperor Ming Huang."

Chiao Sui reluctantly put down his persimmon which had reached an interesting point, and, like the others, hid his hands in his sleeves in the attitude of reverence proper to those who listen to the words of an emperor. Chü-i chanted the following four lines:

"A bit of wood, an end of silk; fashioned they seem.
Chicken-skin, hoar head: age and esteem.

The puppet is tossed a moment and dropped. The play's done.
So man; his life is still in the heart of a passing dream."

The reverence that kept Chiao Sui's hands hidden in his sleeves did not extend to his head. This was cocked critically on one side. Each of the four lines, rhymed a, a, b, a, was composed of seven monosyllabic words, given richness by a strictly arranged tone-pattern that has no counterpart in English.

The two boys, unconcerned with the form of the verses, mused on their content.

"Stilled in the heart of a dream," murmured Chü-i.

"It cost him his Empire."

"No great price," returned his friend.

"The Son of Heaven was a great administrative emperor," pronounced Chiao Sui, unheeding the murmurs, "but not, dare one say, a great poet. Following the system imposed by his ancestor T'ai Tsung, the government of All-Below-the-Sky was administered by scholars and poets exclusively,

since by his wise provision a literary examination in which the emphasis was placed on a knowledge of the moral classics and the theory and practice of poetry was, and still is, the wall over which all candidates for office must climb. It can at least be said that no one in the Empire surpassed the Above One in the appreciation of poetry.

"More than once an unknown scholar standing without the gates sent in a roll of silk painted with the characters of a poem that so delighted the Emperor that he left his banquet, carrying food to the newcomer with his own hands."

"This happened to Tu Fu when unknown," said Chuang, "yet Tu Fu later died of hunger."

"Tu Fu was a great poet, but as a man he was lacking in tact, as Li Po was lacking in sobriety," returned Chiao Sui, and smiled suddenly. "You have heard the story of Li Po's death? It is probably untrue. One night, when joyously drunk, he determined to row on the Great River, for he saw

that there floated on the black water many bright petals that had drifted down from a full-blown moon just passing its prime. He leaned out of his boat to gather them, and so fell in. That was an enviable death, I think."

"Li T'ai Po, Tu Fu, great poets both, were both in the end unsuccessful at the court of Ming Huang," said Chü-i seriously. "How can you say that poets were appreciated beside the imperial throne?"

"A time came," said Chuang, "when men who were not poets, but only politicians became powerful. And the Emperor was too absorbed to check them."

His face was expressionless as he dipped his horn spoon into the dish of dumplings the inn-keeper had brought, but Chü-i glanced at him enlightened.

"If this insignificant one may enquire, was it then the revered elder withdrew?"

A deprecating gesture from Chuang acknowledged the correctness of Chü-i's guess.

"He was absorbed in the Shining One,"

murmured Li Mu, only half heeding the conversation, and ignoring the food. "The government of the Empire was his duty, but Yang Kuei-fei was his life."

"You infer then that life is more than duty?" asked Chuang more gravely than he had yet spoken.

Li Mu pushed a red leaf in front of a yellow caterpillar that was humping its way over the tiles at his feet, and did not reply directly.

"The Shining One looked at me once," he said, addressing no one in particular. "At least ——" he flushed — "I think she looked at me. Her mouth had — had a curve, a something about it for which there are no words.... As if it were wise in caresses."

The insect had crawled over the leaf. With his felt-soled shoe Li Mu pushed the bit of red in front of it again.

"She looked my way and the corners of her mouth turned upward a little as though with pleasure. I saw it though I dared not

look. It was as though an ice-cold knife cut off my breath. Then that same knife became red hot and twisted in my vitals."

Chuang's not unfriendly eyes were on the intense young face before him.

"Did you look behind you to see what the Western Empress Mother was observing?" he suggested. His voice was less mocking than his words.

Li Mu's face became a dull red.

"Yes," he answered slowly, "I was going to explain that. When she had passed and I could move again, I saw that a pair of little green lovebirds sat billing on a branch of peach blossom that hung across the wall at my back.

"And I heard what the Son of Heaven said to the White Jade Lady," resumed Li Mu after a pause. "The Bright Emperor must have followed her glance with his, for he said, 'That is a picture worthy to be painted.' And she answered smiling — I could hear the smile in her voice — 'The elder brother of my Lord has painted it

already,' and indeed when I turned to look, the sun had painted birds, branch and flowers in shadow on the wall."

"You were at that time a little boy in the gold silk garments of the Imperial Musicians from the Pear Blossom Garden?" asked Chuang.

Li Mu nodded.

"The wall rose-red topped with imperial yellow; a branch of peach blossoms on which sat green love birds touching their pink bills above a flushed little boy in yellow.... Yes, I think the Western Empress Mother looked at you, Li Mu, and that you gave her pleasure."

On a long breath Li Mu turned a grateful glance toward Chaung. The scholar pushed forward the boy's neglected chopsticks.

"My little brother must not attempt to live on adoring thoughts of a ghost," he said persuasively. "What men we are that wraiths should slip opaque between us and our food!"

"There were banquets indeed at the

Palace in the old days," remarked Chiao Sui suddenly with a chuckle, applying himself to the flagon. "I was at the name day festival for An Lu-shan."

The two youths stiffened at the name, but the poet continued without noticing their antagonism.

"The festival opened in state. The officials assembled to do honour to the Emperor's foster son stood in rows that spread outward from the throne. They were like peacock feathers in their gold-embroidered silks of red and blue and green. Two enormous peacock feather fans were crossed before the imperial throne, concealing the Emperor. At last they parted to show him immobile in stiff gold brocade. Incense from a great silver unicorn swung round him so that he seemed an inscrutable god floating in a cloud.

"After the formal audience there was feasting. The Eight Imperial Delicacies were served, and the little bells on the jade-handled table-knives tinkled like the laugh-

ter of the ladies who used them. These ladies were dreamlike in their transparent silk gauze robes, embroidered in a hundred colours. They wore kingfisher feathers backed with gold round the line of their hair, and following the curve of their cheeks to their lips. Their loins were outlined with heavy girdles of pearl or turquoise, holding the light silk in place. Before them yellow-clad boys and girls from the Pear Blossom Garden played flutes and drums, clashed their cymbals not too harshly, and plucked brass or silken strings.

"Three days of this and the lady Yang Kuei-fei was tired. She was also very drunk. Now it is seldom," said Chiao Sui, speaking as an expert, "that a woman becomes illuminated with any degree of grace. Men are in this matter much superior. Yang Kuei-fei was an exception. Her skin flushed, her eyes grew deeper, and her voice took on a husky warmth more intoxicating than many measures of wine to the hearer.

"I was with the Emperor when An Lu-

shan bent his clumsy limbs to thank him for this festival in his honour. Any excuse was good enough for a feast in those days, but the big fellow professed to be overwhelmed, and asked permission to thank his foster-mother as well. The Emperor, remarking that she had just left him to return to the Forbidden Enclosure, sent him to find her before she should have gone behind the walls that are closed to all men but the Son of Heaven. Shortly afterward he sent me on an errand in the same direction.

"I went across the many coloured pavilions where wisteria vines twisted up the red-lacquered columns like benevolent green-backed dragons that breathed a pale blue smoke of flowers, and came unexpectedly upon Yang Kuei-fei in the garden this side the Forbidden Wall. She was reclining flushed in her push-chair, surveying through half-closed, wine-darkened eyes the person of her 'foster son.' She did not glance my way, but I dare tell you now that the insolent slow sweep of her look over the big-

limbed Tartar sent my blood pounding in my temples. As for the Tartar, he seemed to swell under her look, though his attitude was respectful enough. At last she spoke, her voice lazy like the last echo of a silver gong struck far away in the hills.

"'It is customary,' she said, 'for the three-day child, once the birthday ceremonies are over, to be given its first bathe. Lu-shan, my son, you must be washed.'

"She gestured without a smile to her attendants, and the giggling chittering girls stripped him, bathed him with attention to detail, then wrapped him in a silk quilt and paraded him in a push chair round the garden like an unwieldy baby on its first outing.

"At this moment the Son of Heaven entered the garden apparently on his way to the Forbidden Enclosure in search of her. I effaced myself, knowing I had no business there, and watched him anxiously, for I expected his anger. But Kuei-fei approached him gravely, her eyebrows raised high like one walking a tight-rope.

"'Our foster son has had his name-day bathe,' she said. 'May I suggest a name-day gift from his exalted foster father?'

"The Above One looked after the push chair in which An Lu-shan was lolling his gross limbs, and chuckled.

"'Our son's three day growth is a marvel and a credit to his parents,' he said, leading Kuei-fei back to her chair. 'He shall have a name-day gift indeed — twenty thousand taels of silver.'"

Chuang amused, surveyed his friend.

"Were you really a witness of this? It seems odd that even you, the Emperor's good friend, should have been there."

Chiao Sui turned on him haughtily.

"There is no truer truth than that conceived in the imagination of a poet," he said.

"In any case," put in Chü-i anxiously, "it is well known that the scene took place exactly as the revered elder describes it. Though I had thought it was within the Forbidden Enclosure."

Li Mu interrupted sombrely, unheeding the argument.

"Down in the lowest depths below the Jade Grey Sea," he said slowly, "there is a spot where no light ever comes. There Lu-shan lies, and will lie always, just as he lay that dawn when his son had ripped up his belly."

"I wish that unfilial son had come sooner," said Chiao Sui. "Kuei-fei died well and quickly; Lu-shan never possessed her solely as he hoped when marching on Ch'ang An. But the little Palace girls the Emperor left behind — I think of them now and remember them as they were that hot afternoon when, my errand belatedly accomplished, I went back along the red and blue pavilions.

"Some, dressed in gauzy robes the colour of sulphur butterflies, hid their faces in their long red sleeves as I passed. One could see their black heads lowered, and sometimes the tip of one mischievous slanting eye. Their hair, knotted in wings on their tem-

ples, glimmered blue like sulphur flames. Most of them were well born, having been sent by their parents as tiny girls to be educated in the Palace in the hope that one day they might attract the Emperor's favour.

"But when the war drums of An Lu-shan roared through the gate of Yu Yang, no one thought of them as with little thin cries they ran this way and that till the soldiers broke in upon them."

"Most of them were dead by the next day," said Chuang, "lying about in corners of the Palace, their delicate flesh broken, their silks defiled with ordure. Truly our age was raised from blood and filth by the warrior-scholar T'ai Tsung, refined to beauty and peace by his successor Ming Huang, only to fall abruptly into filth and blood again with the rebellion of An Lu-shan. Can Kuei-fei be acquitted of this great wrong?"

"A woman's whole duty lies in obedience to man," said Li Mu positively. "In this Kuei-fei was virtuous. Some quality in her roused all who saw her to a madness of

desire to possess her. The Emperor took her from his son. Did she solicit Imperial favour? An Lu-shan would have wrested her from the Emperor. Could she have prevented it?"

"A virtuous woman would have dimmed her own charm lest the Emperor forget his duty. A virtuous woman would have drunk poison that her death might drive him out from the woman's apartments to the council chamber," said Chuang sternly. The others looked at him surprised. The mockery was quite gone from his face.

"That is true," agreed Chiao Sui. "One cannot argue that Yang Kuei-fei was virtuous. On the contrary. Yet there is something in what this boy says. Her power was not in doing, but in being. Events rolled round her as their passive core. She could not have controlled them if she would. If Lu-shan had never been her lover, do you think he would have desired her less when descending on the capital?

"The fault was the Emperor's for turning

from his duty, for the Emperor's gift was not beauty, which is a thing that cannot be judged by moral principles, but strength, which has no excellence but in action."

"He was happy," murmured Li Mu.

"Was he?" returned Chuang quickly. "Is an eagle happy tangled in the silk net men spread in the rice fields for catching sparrows? There were quarrels in the Inner Apartments. Knowing his weakness the Emperor sent Kuei-fei home in disgrace on two different occasions. Obedient, she nevertheless prevailed."

"The moment she had gone the Bright Emperor became so morose that the eunuchs who stood always at his door with clubs ready to beat anyone who offended him, were kept busy dealing blows right and left," chuckled Chiao Sui. "He could not eat, he could not sleep, and sent for her at last on some pretext adroitly furnished to save the imperial face by the harassed chief eunuch, Kao Li-shih."

"The second time she had been days at

home," said Li Mu. "When the imperial messengers came with gifts and word that she had been pardoned, she met them humbly and in tears. 'What am I that the Son of Heaven should seek me out,' she said. 'What return can I make for his gifts! All that I have has come from him. Nothing is my own but this ignoble body that I received from my parents.' With that she cut off her hair, and sent the silken rope to the Emperor. 'Now let me die as is fitting,' she said."

"With the result," added Chuang, seeing the others impressed by the sorrowful sacrifice, "that the Emperor was terrified lest the messengers he sent back post-haste to restrain her might come too late. They did not...."

III

"I THINK of her returning to the Emperor," said Li Mu, unheeding whatever mockery there might have been in Chuang's remark, "unpainted, unadorned, wearing a single garment the colour of tears. Her face was dim with weeping, and her blue-black hair, short and disarranged about it, made her look like a penitent child. The Emperor wept too, I think, and thereafter could refuse her nothing."

"That is true," returned Chuang seriously. "The Son of Heaven had suffered so much during those days of her absence, that thereafter he dared not risk its happening again."

"Her voice was often clear and artless as a child's," said Chiao Sui, "and the sound of it once made an official forget himself. You know that in the Palace, placed as a warning to the Emperor, is a representation of a creature with a horse's body, a dragon's

head, and a tiger's claws. It is the man-eating *Ch'a Yu*, the malevolent beast with the sweet voice of a child. It shows itself in the land whenever an Emperor strays from duty.

"One day when Yang Kuei-fei was chanting a poem to the music of her table lute, this man muttered aside, 'I hear the *Ch'a Yu*,' and glanced at the carving.

"That glance cost him his life. The translucent eyelids of the Imperial Concubine flickered once in his direction.

"'It loves to eat men,' she observed carelessly, and continued her playing. That official was never seen again, for there were many watching for an opportunity to act upon any desire of the imperial favourite."

"But the Enlightened One himself, when striving to save the White Jade Lady from the hate of the soldiers at Ma Wei, swore that she had never interfered in matters of State," protested Chü-i. "She might have had much power if she had chosen."

"It is true she was without desire to rule

openly," agreed Chuang. "She was perhaps too indolent — or even too good-natured, who knows? — to order many murders. She even spared Mei Fei."

"Surely that was to her credit," cried Li Mu. "Mei Fei had been the imperial favourite before Kuei-fei's advent. She remained Kuei-fei's only serious rival. Yet the Yang concubine allowed her to live in the luxury of the Palace for more than twenty years — until, indeed, Kuei-fei herself was forced to flee."

"It is said that at the moment of his escape from the Palace, the Emperor would have sent for Mei Fei to take her with his party, and that Kuei-fei prevented it," remarked Chuang.

"It is not likely that she felt any active good-will toward her rival," said Chü-i, "but consider the cruelties usual among ruling concubines toward others. A predecessor in a similar position to that of Kuei-fei slit her rival's ears and nose, pierced her eyes, cut off her limbs at the knees and el-

bows, and had her thrown living on a dung heap, bidding the passers-by mock at her as the human sow."

Chuang made a gesture of distaste.

"It is apparent that in the lowly state in which humanity exists, the rousing of the passions more often brings forth ugliness than beauty," he observed; "therefore it is better neither to rouse nor to be roused. Kuei-fei roused others, but it is not known that she was often in a passion herself."

"There was a morning when, entering Pei Hua Palace unceremoniously, she saw Mei Fei's slippers under the Imperial bed," said Chiao Sui slily. "The Plum Blossom Concubine was on that occasion in considerable danger."

"That was when Kuei-fei had been but a short time at the Palace," said Chü-i. "But even when her power was established as practically absolute, she took no cruel revenge."

"Unless it was cruelty to compel the Emperor to promise never again to entertain

the Senior Concubine," agreed Chiao Sui. "He took a whimsical revenge that morning. He gathered up Kuei-fei's jewels and garments that she had thrown off in her rage, and sent them as a gift to Mei Fei. He was a kind man, and often sent her gifts in secret."

Li Mu obstinately persisted in his contention.

"Kuei-fei must have guessed," he said, "yet with this cause before her, and power for revenge, she let Mei Fei live. Such clemency has been rare in the Palace."

There was silence for a while. The two boys remembered how this present T'ang dynasty had been grounded in blood. First, the founder, T'ai Tsung, a great constructive emperor, a supreme lover of learning, but a resolute murderer; then the terrible Empress Wu, who was concubine to T'ai Tsung, and afterwards concubine to his son and successor. She ruled the Empire first through several puppet boy-emperors whom she murdered when they grew old

enough to have opinions of their own, and at last proclaimed herself Emperor, murdering anyone who raised the shadow of an objection. They were many. The Empress Wei snatched the power from the Empress Wu in her old age, and began her reign by poisoning her own husband.

Li Lung-chi, later known as the Emperor Ming Huang, was the Empress Wei's nephew. Wei had none of the Empress Wu's qualities, and he soon forced her to kill herself and her children. Then, having slaughtered all who had seemed friendly to her, including the Prime Minister, Ming Huang settled down to create an age that has been one of the brightest moments in the world's history, when beauty of form, of colour, of words was adored and created.

The Chinese were a forward as well as a backward looking people, but it is improbable that the young scholar Po Chü-i, then seeking in his mind words for a poem in honour of Yang Kuei-fei, guessed that the beauty fostered by her lover would delight

men on the other side of the world twelve centuries later.

Fair-haired people from Siberia were seen in the streets and the Palace at Ch'ang An during the T'ang dynasty, however. They are described in the chronicles of the time as "red-headed with green eyes." And probably only the line of steel presented by the Mahometans kept Ming Huang's armies from spreading westward into Europe which then, in the eighth century, lay in fragments. The very people whom Ming Huang had incessantly to drive back from his Northern borders, the Hsiung Nu, were the Huns that had devastated Rome three centuries earlier.

Christianity had already been brought into the Chinese Empire by the Syrian priest Alopen, and had been welcomed by T'ai Tsung, in his famous edict, "*Truth bears not one name only.*"

IV

"*Truth bears not one name only*," murmured Chü-i into the silence of the courtyard. "My revered elder of the wine cup has inferred that the Emperor's belief that Yang Kuei-fei took no interest in state affairs was unfounded?"

Chiao Sui roused from a doze over his wine.

"When news first reached the Palace that An Lu-shan was inciting the soldiers to rebellion," he said, "the Emperor determined to lead his armies in person against the ingrate. It was Yang Kuei-fei who kept him from doing what might have saved the Empire. The Son of Heaven found her in her apartments with her clothes torn to rags, her hair dishevelled and her mouth stopped with yellow earth. Appalled at the havoc she had made of her beauty, he promised not to go."

"Thereafter," said Chuang, "the final

destruction of the beauty that Ming Huang, through a reign of forty-five years, had fostered, was only a matter of days. Those who might have remained faithful saw in his surrender to Kuei-fei a proof that not the Emperor but the Yang clan ruled them. An Lu-shan came steadily down from the North, continually joined by renegade soldiers. Ming Huang's generals went out to meet him; and the Emperor with Yang Kuei-fei made revelry in the Palace of Intense Brilliance so near its doom. You were there at this time, Elder Brother?"

Chiao Sui assented slowly.

"I was there," he said. "I had heard the rumours and I knew they were not false. Yang Kuei-fei was like one possessed by two opposing demons. She must have banquets, dancing, music all day and all night. Then, at times, she would shut herself away in her apartments in P'êng Lai Palace, send away the maids who served her, and the eunuchs, and remain so the length of the sun, without tasting food.

"The Emperor wandered disconsolately about the Palace grounds at such times, impatiently sending to Yang Kuo-chung those who came with word of the rebel armies. His mind was fixed on the green door of P'êng Lai Palace, which even he dared not open to confront the woman who sat all day with her face between her hands.

"The whole of the Palace city was in a state of extreme demoralisation. The scandalous laxity which the Five Households of Yang had introduced years before had been the beginning; the Emperor's refusal to attend to his duties had given laxity sanction. The freedom of behaviour which was allowed to Kuei-fei, Kuo Kuo and other favourites had spread to the rest, and now, with doom at the gates, with the veneer of propriety already worn very thin, the Emperor himself forgot the rules that keep the Inner Apartments closed to all men but himself.

"It was on one of Kuei-fei's bad days. The Emperor had sent her jade fish in case

it might be toothache that troubled her. To no avail. She had vehemently refused to see him, and the members of the Yellow Gate had been forbidden to approach her. Her maids were in tears. The Emperor was distracted and at last brought me a dish of the fresh lichis she loved, hoping I might persuade her to eat.

"I went reluctantly toward her palace on this unprecedented errand. At the door her Tibetan lion dogs stood guard, and the little Lo Sze dogs whined for her. Even her famous white parrot which she had taught to recite the Sutras, had been excluded. This parrot, by the way, is said to have been a gift from An Lu-shan. The lattices were closed over her windows. I hesitated, for I feared very much the anger that might confront me if I pushed open that forbidden green moon-door. I feared more to return to the Emperor unsuccessful....

"Inside, the room was in heavy shadow, cut here and there with blades of sunlight through the airholes in the blinds. I saw

that Yang Kuei-fei was sitting motionless on the floor.

"To my surprise, she showed no sign that my being there was a gross impertinence and impropriety. Lifting heavy eyelids she asked humbly: "'Ko Shu-han will turn him back at T'ung Kuan, do you not think so?"

"I was able to reassure her sincerely at that time, for I knew Ko Shu-han to be a great general, and I believed that he would defeat An Lu-shan's armies. And so he would have done if Yang Kuo-chung had not prevailed on the Emperor to order him out of his impregnable position in the T'ung Kuan pass."

"The Western Empress Mother was glad of your reassurance?" asked Li Mu eagerly.

"She rose and began to arrange and ornament her hair, putting rouge on her cheeks and drawing the line of her lips and brows with care," returned Chiao Sui. "I knew she was going to the festival, and I was glad. But when I followed her, dressed now in her robes of ceremony, toward the place where

the Emperor paced beside the lake, she stopped suddenly, turned her back on him before he had seen her, and walked up and down for a long while, wringing her hands."

"I would like to have seen her as you did, painting the willow droop of her eyebrows, and rouging the mouth that was already like a crimson peony-flower," said Chü-i. "Yet how dared you remain? It is very strange!"

"Very strange," murmured Chuang sardonically. It was clear that he did not believe a word of Chiao Sui's claim to have seen the Imperial Concubine in these intimate circumstances.

"I could not go till she dismissed me," said Chiao Sui, ignoring Chuang, "and this she did not do. I was very willing to stay. Although she was now forty at least, her skin still kept the warm pallor of the moon. The contour of her face, the line of her hand, eluded the eye. I tried to fix them in my mind, but could not. I was uplifted and astonished like a drunken man who weeps with delight at some beauty he cannot name.

I think she was unaware of me, for when she had completed her toilet she sat a long time gazing at her face reflected in the polished gold-bronze mirror set round with jewels."

"Ch'ang O, the Moon Lady," said Chü-i.

"I thought of Ch'ang O," Chiao Sui agreed. "Her chamber, like the moon, was a thicket of fantastic trees. These were carved in various sorts of semi-precious stones, coral and amber. Several were made of green jade. One precious tree, set in a silver bowl, was all of carved white jade. It had flowers of which the petals were pearls, the centres pale topazes. A little tree stood in a narrow bar of sunlight, itself like sunlight frozen, for it was cut in amber, the pieces perfectly joined. Even the veins in the wine-brown leaves were shown.

"Among the trees were placed strange animals, small in proportion. There was a crystal unicorn, a tiger of bronze encrusted with gold. A bat of sea-green jade had been hung in a tree of carved grey stone with leaves of jet."

"The uncouth soldiers of An Lu-shan were soon to come crashing in among these fragile things," said Li Mu sombrely.

"As I stood respectfully near the door," continued Chiao Sui, "the Western Empress Mother seemed the most fragile of all. In the half light, in her pale, apricot-coloured silks, she seemed almost to float. Certainly her face that gazed profoundly back at her from the dim surface of the mirror seemed disembodied.

"She roused at last out of her reverie.

"'This mirror, Chiao Sui,' she said, and turned it so that I could see the magpie moulded on the back, 'was given me by my lord.'

"I saw it was a replica of the mirror belonging to the woman in the legend, whose magpie mirror served her only so long as she remained faithful to her husband. On her betraying him, the bronze bird flew away.

"'You see,' said Yang Kuei-fei, preparing to leave the room, 'I have made myself

ready to meet my lord before this mirror, and the magpie has not taken wing....'

"There was a wistful note in her voice. I have since wondered what she meant. Hypocrisy is far too easy a charge. Only cowards are hypocrites, and Yang Kuei-fei was not a coward.

"I was about to reply in some confusion when she stopped suddenly before the lamp. This had apparently been burning since the night before. The wick floated low on the oil, and at the end of the wick hung the glowing red ball that women call the lamp-flower.

"It foretells a lover's speedy return.

"I heard the Silver Poplar Concubine draw in her breath. Without glancing at me she touched it with her finger so that only a faint blue coil of smoke showed where it had been...."

Li Mu and Chü-i turned quick faces toward the poet, but Chiao Sui continued without waiting for comment.

"Thereafter the days and nights rivalled

each other in festivities. All day the water-clocks dripped time away, at night the red-capped cockman at the Palace door struck as usual the passing hours; and there were many of us now who knew he struck the coming of doom. At sunrise he uttered as usual his shrill cry, but now the Emperor made no pretence of leaving Kuei-fei's side to attend the Dawn Audience in the Purple Inner Apartments, and allowed his ministers to make all decisions without him.

"One thin gold morning the court was shown a circus in the Forbidden Park. The Five Households of Yang were massed together, each household with its servants dressed in one distinctive colour, like well laid out beds of flowers beneath the trees. There were also the three thousand ladies from the Twelve Towered Palaces.

"The circus began with posturing dances performed by four hundred horses to the tune of 'The Overturned Platter,' played by Palace musicians in primrose coloured silk. The horses were decorated as if they had

been dancing girls, in loosely woven silk mesh hung with tiny golden bells. Jewels were woven in their manes and tails.

"Some of the horses danced on disks held by eight strong men at arms' length above their heads. On this high platform they postured gracefully as Fei Yen the Flying Swallow who danced on the palm of a courtier's hand. They were beautiful animals; little pointed ears, slim fetlocks, purple-glinting eyes set deep in square sockets glancing proudly from left to right, their tails like the spray of a waterfall. Surely not even the steeds of Han were equal in beauty and intelligence to the T'ang horses!

"After the horses came the Emperor's fighting cocks, shining in the sun as though lacquered red and gold and blue. Chia Ch'ang, the Inspired Cock Youth, brought out his mechanical wooden bird, and made the ladies trill with laughter. The Emperor gave him a silk purse of gold.

"Huang P'iao, the dwarf whom the Emperor called his Flesh Elbow Rest, leaped up

and exhibited his skill at throwing darts into a bronze jar at a great distance. The darts were made of thorn, so that they sprang back to his hand. He threw one a hundred times without dropping it or missing. The Emperor rewarded him.

"Then came the women dancers, the women riders, performing acrobatical feats on horseback at full gallop; clowns, singing men and women, and a procession of strange animals that had been sent as tribute to the court.

"At night the whole of the Forbidden Park was lighted by silk lanterns hung in the trees. These were in the shape of fantastic animals and grotesque faces. As the breeze swayed them the wood became alive with strangeness. Under them walked Palace ladies wrapped in feather cloaks, often with lovers at their sides, for the unconventional Yang households had relaxed the manners of the court. From a distance might sometimes be heard the thin wailing of a flute, playing 'The Snapped Willow Song.'

"One moonlit night the entire court went out of Ch'ang An to the west for a festival by the K'un Ming pool, that was dug by Han Wu Ti a thousand years ago. Yang Kuei-fei, in a cloak made of the green and black down of the eider duck, was carried in a palace push-chair. She had ornaments of green jade in her hair, and under her cloak one could see her strong little feet in shoes that were encrusted with jade and silver. Before her the Emperor rode on his horse whose name was 'Shine-White-in-the-Night.' Little Kuo Kuo on her dappled horse dashed far ahead of the cavalcade, then back again, and the Emperor laughed at her lack of decorum.

"On K'un Ming pool storied boats hung with silk banners and fantastic lanterns awaited them. In the middle of the wide water there was an immense mechanical fish-dragon. As the waves moved about it, it lashed its tail and roared lazily.

"The imperial boat came close to the shore in readiness, but the Emperor, unwilling to board it till he had learned Kuei-

fei's pleasure, approached her chair. I was near.

"'Does my lord not find the large boats too full of people on this perfect night?' Her voice had a flat timbre as though the silk strings of a table lute had been too tightly stretched for long and had suddenly slackened. 'Is there no smaller boat?'

"The Son of Heaven gave an order to Kao Li-shih, and a small boat of Sand Pear wood — the wood that comes from the K'un Lun mountains and will not sink — was rowed to the shore. The canopy above its centre was hung with perfumed silk curtains embroidered with Silver Crested Love Pheasants, and a silver unicorn, that walks with equal ease on land and water and is the symbol of perfect good, stood astride its roof.

"'Come with us to direct the rowing,' said Yang Kuei-fei to me. 'I will have no eunuchs on board to-night.'

"The Emperor looked at her in surprise but in those last days he indulged all her whims, and as I hesitated, he gestured his

assent to this breach of propriety. So it happened that I was with them on this last excursion of the Bright Emperor and the loveliest woman in history. The water under the moon was like stretched white silk. Occasionally a white heron flew. The lotus, that had lain closed on the surface all day, opened petals that gleamed like mother of pearl. The boat moved lazily through a fine carpet of 'willow snow' and the girls sitting in the stern and prow played on their gold pipes a song called 'The Jade Birds of Love.'

"I heard murmurs from behind the curtain.

"'Shall we go first to the Weaving Maiden and take a message from her to her Herd Boy lover on the other side?' It was Kuei-fei's voice.

"'It is several miles across the pool,' returned Ming Huang doubtfully.

"'We have the night before us,' said Kuei-fei, 'I think their hearts must ache at being so far apart.'

"There was a tender assenting murmur

from the Emperor, and I directed the rowers to make their paddles of cinnamon wood move more quickly toward the statue of the Weaving Maiden that stood in the distance. The far-off music from the pleasure boats sounded mournful as the wail of gibbons by the Serpent River. The moonbeams glimmered frostily on the disturbed water. I fell into a reverie.... An Lu-shan at the gates of the city, if the last reports were true. What would become of this moonlit idyll, now drowned and oblivious in its own waters of dream?

"The Emperor's voice came to me.

"'If we were parted like the Weaving Maiden and the Herd boy....'

"I confess I listened for the Imperial Concubine's reply, expecting protestations. None came. A moment's silence, and then, as if somehow surprised at herself, she said:

"'I should be sad... and I would wait for you.' She added more lightly, 'Perhaps, since we have shown ourselves regardful of her effigy's loneliness here on earth to-night,

the Weaving Maiden by the Silver River in the sky might direct you to where I could be found.'"

Chü-i broke in excitedly on the poet at this point.

"So that is how it happened that after Kuei-fei's death..."

He stopped as Chuang spoke without having noticed the interruption.

"The Bright Emperor," he said, "and the Silver Poplar Concubine were like children who stuff themselves with little green sugar plums, while a tiger that twists his tail and whose teeth are white, crouches at the open door of his cage."

"In truth," agreed Chiao Sui. "The pleasure seekers, returned to the palace but loath to go indoors, were still making music under the grotesque lanterns of the Inner Park when dawn came up. And with the first streak of dawn Lu-shan and his soldiers came yelling into the city."

"And only a few hours later Yang Kuei-fei hung like a fallen pear blossom from a

crooked branch of a tree at Ma Wei post house," continued Chü-i under his breath. "There is a wrong that will never be forgotten. She died too soon. She might have lived till now, and my brother and I could have touched our foreheads to the ground before her feet."

Chiao Sui glanced to where the sun, like a red flower floating low, sank its roots into the green sky water.

"We have talked all afternoon," he said, "and for my part I wish to sleep."

He curled his feet under his robe, put his head down on the low table, the lappets of his scholar's cap sticking out comically like bat's ears, and slept.

Chuang surveyed him gravely.

"I have no rule to measure the patience possessed by the illustrious youths who have honoured our conversation," he remarked, "but my own desire is less to wait here till our revered friend choses to wake, than to examine further the tablets erected in these courtyards to dead greatness. I find them

an unfailing refreshment to the spirit. That monument of red marble, for example, proclaims the worth of a certain Sui Emperor. Now it is well known that he murdered every member of his family and most of his friends, by poison, the sword, and means less expeditious but more painful. The tablet you see there announces to posterity that he was the star of mercy, the sun of kindness and the moon of benevolence...."

Li Mu and Chü-i, well-brought-up Chinese youths, looked at their elder with wide-eyed horror, not at the misdeeds of the long dead emperor, but at the implied irreverence of Chuang's words. The scholar chuckled a trifle apologetically.

"The reverence due to those highly placed in the past is felt at times as a chain about the feet of one's intelligence," he said. "The immediate dilemma, however, is this; shall we serve the revered poet Chiao Sui as once I and my companions served the great Li Po when the Emperor's command found him quite helpless in a wine shop? There is a lily

pool full of suitably cold water at hand. Or shall we leave him here as hostage to the innkeeper?"

"If the revered elder finds himself temporarily without money," said Chü-i eagerly, "will he allow his insignificant younger brother to pay what is owing?"

"He will not only allow it, but will thank the illustrious though youthful host. For he has not one copper cash in his purse to strike against another."

"Then let us also leave the revered poet as hostage," suggested Li Mu, "so that, when the moon has risen, we three can rejoin him here to talk of the purple mountains of K'un Lun, where, years after her death, the Bright Emperor found Kuei-fei again. She had eaten the Cassia flowers that grow in the moon, and her body had become translucent as glass. Dressed in gauzy leek-green garments she sat by the Lake of Gems, surrounded by amber maidens."

"I perceive now why you refused the meal of dumplings our good host provided," ob-

served Chuang as he rose. "You were waiting till the sunset should bring red clouds. Eat them, young sage, and dream your dreams. I will return at moon-rise."

PART III

I

THE moon was rising as Li Mu and Li Kuei-nien came down the incense-fragrant courtyard to the place of meeting. Li Mu had got the old musician a silk cap more in keeping with his standing than the straw hat had been, and under it his grey hair was neatly coiled and pinned.

Chiao Sui still slept with his head on the table. Li Mu bowed respectfully to him as he sat down.

"Where is the illustrious youth, your friend," asked Kuei-nien laying his *p'i pa* carefully on the ground.

"He left me without speaking," returned Li Mu, "and by the moving of his lips and the happy absorption in his face, I think he was making a poem in his mind."

Kuei-nien made a placid gesture. The change in the old man was remarkable. His manner had softened; he watched Li

Mu's least movement with joy. The young man seemed unconscious of this. His thoughts were with his friend.

"I wonder if my brother saw the moon step over the eastern edge of the sky," he said. "She performs the Wu dance now on the borders of the Jade Grey Sea."

Li Kuei-nien took his eyes from the young man to glance toward the east. The mist that hung about the moon might indeed have been swaying sleeves of gauze.

"How strange she is, and secret," continued Li Mu. "Imperturbable and cool she moves among her lovers. The Blue-green Wooden Dragon is behind her; on her left the Fire-bird, coloured vermilion and blue. The Silver Tiger waits her in the west, and in the north broods the Warrior, sombre as black water, in the country of ghouls and goblins."

Kuei-nien eased his back against the trunk of the Cassia tree and folded his hands in his sleeves; but Li Mu could not keep still. With another ceremonious bow first

to his master then to the sleeping Chiao Sui, he rose, his eyes on the Milky Way.

"There is a shallow stream across her path. To-night it flows so quietly one can see the pebbles of pearl and crystal in its bed."

He fell silent and Kuei-nien, who wished to hear his voice, spoke.

"The river is so low to-night that one might think the Weaving Maiden could leave her loom a while and ford it to the Herd Boy on the other bank."

"She does," returned Li Mu quickly. "Look! Do you see two starry points half-way across the stream? Those are her white feet in the water."

He laughed at his own fancy.

"So the inexorable judge is cheated and the lovers meet again, without waiting for the moment once a year when magpies hover with their wings spread tip to tip to make a bridge for them."

Chü-i approached suddenly, glanced abstractedly at the other two, and without a word pounced on Chiao Sui's roll of writing

silk that still lay beside his outstretched arm. Half-way across the courtyard again, the boy hesitated, then came back and laid his own roll in its place.

"Read it if you will, my brother," he said indistinctly, and vanished into the inn.

Li Mu reached reverently for the silk.

"Did I not tell you he was composing a poem?" he said. "These moments come on him suddenly after long waiting. I know them for then his lips move soundlessly and he, the gentlest of friends, is impatient if I speak."

He opened the roll, and straining his eyes in the light from the inn window, found it painted with columns of intricate ideograms in black ink.

"'The Everlasting Wrong,'" he read the title, "I think it is in honour of Yang Kuei-fei. Oh my brother!"

He turned the silk so that Kuei-nien could read with him, but the old man's eyes clung rather to his pupil's face. The poem, though unfinished, was already long. It was

written in lines of seven characters each, each line broken after the fourth character. Li Mu hummed his way down several columns, absorbed in pleasure. Suddenly he broke off and turned to the musician.

"One thing is needed — no, not needed — but one thing could add beauty to these verses in honour of dead beauty. You who knew her, venerable father — will you accompany my brother on your *p'i pa* when he returns to chant them to us?"

Li Kuei-nien glanced at the silk, noting the tone pattern indicated.

"I think I could improvise for him," he assented, "I know the form."

Chuang approached from the direction of the main temple. Apparently his study of the lives of past emperors as cut in stone for the edification of posterity had refreshed him, for his manner was joyous. He bowed to the two and surveyed his friend Chiao Sui who, as if pricked by the not unmalicious scrutiny, woke with a start, lifting a round sleep-reddened face from the table.

"The moon rises," observed Chuang.

Chiao Sui grinned as he reached for the wine flagon, but made no attempt to reply.

"One at least of the devotees of the pear blossom ghost still waits, I see," he said when he had drunk. His tone was friendly. "What is there left to tell, O insatiable lover of a shade!"

Li Mu prompted him, refilling at the same time his emptied cup.

"When Lu-shan's son, having murdered his father, was in turn executed by the son of Ming Huang, the Imperial throne was once more in the hands of a T'ang ruler. If this insignificant young person may inquire, did the elder scholar remain near the Palace during the intervening years of blood?"

"No," returned Chiao Sui. "I escaped service with the Tartar usurper. The palace had become a shambles, and the smell of blood is an exceptionally distasteful one. Worse, Lu-shan, in his rage at finding Kuei-

fei departed in Ming Huang's company, had destroyed the ancestral tablets of the Imperial house!"

Li Mu and Li Kuei-nien drew hissing breaths of horror. Even Chuang shook his head.

"I joined the deposed Emperor in Szechwan, where for three years he led the inconsolable life of an exile. Since Kuei-fei's death he had become suddenly an old man. His son meanwhile fought for the throne and at last regained it. His first action, of course, was to restore the ancestral tablets; his next, to declare his father Emperor.

"Ming Huang, however, would not reascend the throne. Kuei-fei was dead; the Palace had become intolerable to him. Obedient, his son accepted the throne he had recovered, and bestowed on his father the title of Shang Huang — senior Emperor — taking for himself the imperial name of Su Tsung.

"The old Emperor had one desire — to find out Kuei-fei's grave. He found it, had

it opened, and wailed like one possessed. For it was empty. Not a jewelled flower from her hair, not a bone, an eyelash nor a gem-encrusted shoe was there. But as if to mark the place and intensify its emptiness, one thing lay in the opened grave: the scent bag she had always carried, and in which she had kept a part of a gold box, and half a jewelled clasp for her hair. These were not in the bag, but the Emperor had their fellows in his sleeve. He himself had broken them one night long since, keeping one half as token of their love.

"Ming Huang took the empty scent bag, and carried it, wet with his tears, to a Taoist magician named T'ung Yu.

"'Search out the woman who had this once,' he commanded. 'Find her, whether in the heavens or in the darkness by the Yellow Springs.' And the Taoist, striking his head on the ground before the Lord of all below the sky, promised."

Li Mu, with a quick gesture of apology, here sprang up, for Chü-i had re-appeared.

"'I cannot find the words I need,' complained the poet childishly, ignoring the others. 'Give me that roll you have and I will burn it. How dared I hope to write fittingly of the Shining One.'"

In a low voice Li Mu soothed him as though he were in truth the unhappy infant he seemed.

"What ails the boy?" inquired Chiao Sui, putting down his wine cup.

"He writes a poem in honour of Yang Kuei-fei," explained Kuei-nien. "We have the half of it here."

"Ah," said Chiao Sui quickly, "and now his wind fails and he fears he may not be able to last the course. I have been often in like case. It is torment. Tell him to stay with it till he gets his second breath."

"Perhaps if you would recite to us the poem already written," Li Mu was saying persuasively, "the rest might follow. The great Li has promised to accompany your reading on his *p'i pa*."

"The venerable old man honours my

wretched verse beyond its deserts," muttered Chü-i.

"Try it, brother." Li Mu placed a candle ready.

Po Chü-i took up his manuscript and began unhappily to read, his face lighting somewhat as he chanted, "The Ballad of the Everlasting Wrong."

II

Ming Huang Desires Fabulous Beauty.

The beauty of women was precious in the great Han Emperor's eyes.
For years he dreamed of the maid of legend whose beauty was such
That a glance brought city-walls toppling; the wandering gleam of her smile
Laid high-built kingdoms in dust. He sought, but he sought her in vain.

Yang Kuei-fei is bred in Seclusion.

Now in the household of Yang was a daughter yet immature,
In the Springtime Apartments nourished in secret that no one should know.
She seemed the engendered of Heaven, her body a dazzle of light.
Once seen it could not be forgotten, its loveliness haunted the mind.

She is Married to Prince Shou.

She was placed by the side of the Princely One, where the turn of her eye,
The hint of a single smile caused a hundred passionate glances.
The ladies of all the Six Palaces faded and withered beside her;
The white lead powder, the black eye-stone, no longer had any colour.

She is Seen and Desired by the Emperor.

The Springtime was chill; by the monarch's permission she bathed in the pool
Of the Glorious Purity Palace, in the hot springs, unctuous and yellow.
When her youthful attendants helped her to rise she was exquisite, languid,
And the Emperor's favour whelmed her in waters of kindness.

They Are United.

Her cloudy hair on her temples, her face like a pallid blossom,
With golden footsteps she moved, her lovely body swaying.
The curtained bed was set in the Rose Hibiscus Gardens,
And there they passed the soft spring night in darkness.

The Emperor Neglects State Duties.

Bitterly short the dark. Relentlessly rose the sun.
But the Princely Ruler neglected to meet at dawn with his courtiers.
Joy held him, and pleasure; she served at continual banquets.
Many the springtime excursions, and night succeeded night.

He Neglects all his Other Women.

Three thousand women there were in the halls at the Emperor's bidding;
The Dragon passion for all was spent on one exquisite body.
Those in the House of Gold served only to tend at her toilet;

In the Towers of Jade she was often illumined with wine at the feasting.

The Yang Clan is Exalted.

Her sisters, her brothers and all of her clan were favoured with bounty.
It is sad to remember the glories that were, and are not, in their households.
Then in the Middle Kingdom the hearts of parents longed
Not for sons as is meet; the birth of girls brought rejoicing.

Revelry in the Palace.

The lofty Palace of Li pierced the shining clouds.
Immortal music was heard, of strings and flutes in the wind,
Leisurely breath-blown sounds, and a slow posturing dance;
All the day the Princely One watched her and had not enough.

The Attack of An Lu-shan.

The scabbards, the drums at Yü Yang! They come, shaking the ground!
They shatter, they scatter the notes of the Rainbow Feather Song.
The nine-storied pillars are lost in the smoke and dust of the battle.
A thousand chariots move; ten thousand horsemen southwestward.

The Flight of the Emperor.

The kingfisher pennons shake. They go forward; they halt; they go forward;
From the western gate of Ch'ang An, for a hundred *li* they go onward.

Now the six divisions rebel, who could withstand the confusion!
Impelled by fate, Moth-eyebrows dies before the horsemen.

The Death of Yang Kuei-fei.

The filigree flowers of her head-dress fall, the kingfisher jewels,
The little gold birds, head-scratchers of jade, — there is none to preserve them.
The Princely Ruler's face is obscured by his sleeve; he is helpless.
In despairing sorrow he turns; her blood and his tears flow together.

The Emperor Continues his Flight.

Yellow the wind-swept dust; *hsiao-su!* the wail of the wind.
The hanging road twists high in the mountains of the Two-Edged Sword.
Lonely the O Mei mountains. The Imperial banners are faded.
Dulled are the yak's tail streamers, and the sun's colour is thin.

He Grieves for Yang Kuei-fei.

The rivers of Shu are grey-green jade; Shu hills are emerald jade.
At sunrise, at sunset, the Emperor bows, lamenting the death of his love.
Seen from the travelling palace the moon is a colour that injures the heart.
The night rain sounds like little bells; it cuts the bowels with grief.

He Returns to her Grave.

The sky wheels; the sun recurs; the court returns.
With fettered, irresolute feet, he wavers beside her grave.
Deeply they search in the earth, in the mud of Ma Wei slope.
Empty the place of death; her jade-clear face is gone.

He Returns to the Capital.

The officials look at their lord; they turn their faces and weep.
They gaze to the east, to Ch'ang An, give rein to their steeds and return.
There on the pool are the water plants as in the past.
There in the pleasure grounds by Wei Yang palace are willows.

Garden Memories.

In the gardens the rose hibiscus; the lord remembers her face.
The willows by Wei Yang tower have leaves like the curve of her brows.
How at a sight like this, how can tears be restrained!
How shall tears not fall, and dropping wet the garments!

All is Neglected in the Palace.

The wind of spring is sweet in the flowers of peach and plum.
There is rain in the Wu T'ung tree in the season of falling leaves.*

* The Wu T'ung tree is the one in which the birds of happiness nest.

The autumn grasses grow in the west
and south of the Palace,
And leaves lie heaped on the steps;
none sweeps up their rosy colour.

Age and Grief are Everywhere.

White is the hair of the Pear Blossom
pupils grown suddenly old;
In the Pepper Apartments, alas, the
maidens are faded and old.
In the Palace halls at dusk the fireflies
flicker past,
And the heart of the Emperor melts
with sorrow as metal is fused.

He Cannot Rest.

The lonely, untended lamp is symbol of
his grief;
Hot with resentment he sees it, and
cannot accomplish sleep.
Slowly, slowly bells and drums through
hours of dark;
Bright the river of stars, then the dawn
at the edge of the sky.

He is Lonely.

The mandarin * roof-tiles are cold with
hoarfrost flowers in layers;
The kingfisher † quilt is cold; who
should be there to warm it?

* Mandarin ducks are a symbol of conjugal fidelity.

† The original poem has two characters for "kingfisher" here: *fei*, the red-throated cock, and *ts'ui*, the green-winged hen, to intensify the inference of mated happiness which Ming Huang has lost.

For apart, far apart, lies he who is living, lies she who is dead.
His dreams await her, but never once does she come near him.

The Taoist Priest T'ung Yu.

A Taoist from Lin Ch'ung of the Hung Tu school came by,
In the clarified truth of his spirit, he was able to converse with ghosts.
He saw the wounded heart, the backward thought of the monarch,
And this most learned magician received instructions to seek her.

He Searches Above and Below.

He pushes aside the clouds, he gallops through ether like lightning.
He goes up to heaven, he enters the earth; his search is unceasing.
Jade grey is the upper sky; he drops down to the Yellow Springs.
Vague, vague is hell, like the width of the sea; not there does he find her.

III

When Po Chü-i had come to the last of his verses, Li Mu, seeing that light had returned to his friend's face, held out his hand to prevent disturbing comments. After an absorbed moment, the poet rose and disappeared, without a word of excuse, and with only a mechanical bow around the table. As he went Chiao Sui started, felt at his girdle, and glanced over the table and beneath it.

"Has that boy taken my writing silk?"

Li Mu's face was guilty as he admitted that Chü-i had done just that.

"And what am I to do if a poem comes to me?" complained the elder poet indignantly.

"He would have begged it from you, illustrious scholar," said Li Mu uncertainly, for it was rather more probable that Chü-i in the fervour of composition, might have snatched it absent-mindedly from the very belt of the other. "But you were sleeping and he feared to disturb you. My own writ-

ing silk is of inferior quality. I dare not offer it. But I will go at once and buy you another roll like that my friend has borrowed."

"Where is it to be bought so late at night," grumbled the poet. "I am sure to think of a poem before this flagon is out."

A chuckle made him turn.

"By the colour of its edges, I should judge that my elder brother's silk has been long rolled in its present whiteness," observed Chuang, unfastening his own roll from his belt. "But allow me to present you with mine."

Chiao Shi's good nature returned as suddenly as it had left him.

"I accept, illustrious friend," he said, "for I guess that your roll also is carried more from habit than for use."

The poet, Chuang's roll securely at his belt, poured more wine into the empty cups.

"Your learned friend's poem is good," he remarked to Li Mu, "but aside from the points in which it differs from other versions of Kuei-fei's story, he has scarcely mentioned

the Taoist's visit to the Nether World. Now if I were writing his poem I would tell more of that lightless place."

"But the White Jade Lady was not there," protested Li Mu, "and after all, the poem is about her."

"At that point the narrative had to do with the *search* for her," Chiao Sui said firmly. "Now were I writing it I would tell of the darkness by the Yellow Springs, the..."

"Does my elder brother require solitude for the writing of a supplementary poem?" asked Chuang mildly. "If so, the honourable company will, I think, withdraw with me."

Chiao Sui grinned at him and returned to the flagon.

"This roll at my belt is only a substitute and not yet moulded to my way of thought," he declared, "therefore, if the honourable company will remain, I will try to express my mind in speech. Besides, I perceive that my youthful rival has taken the ink-stone."

"We wait with eagerness for the speech of the revered elder," murmured Chuang.

"The necromancer," began Chiao Sui, staring into his wine cup. "The necromancer, seeing that the eyes of the Son of Heaven overflowed with grief, that his white hair was dishevelled and fell from its pins, and that in his distraction he had filled his mouth with yellow dust, withdrew after making the customary obeisances.

"Where to find Yang Kuei-fei, whose spirit had blown out of her mouth under the pear tree three years before! He looked at the solid-seeming earth under his feet, and at the hard blue above him and shuddered.

"At last he went into an empty place and sat down on the ground. For a long time he sat there, his head hung low between his shoulders, his hands slack between his knees. Then in the end his consciousness split, and one half went without him and became a mentor speaking in his ear.

"The Taoist listened, and groaned consent. He knew what he must do, though the

hair bristled under his cap at knowing. The earth seemed quicksand to hold back his heavy legs, but he went on to Feng Tu in Szechwan, where is an entrance to Yin Shih, the Nether World.

"There listening at the cave's mouth, he could hear a far-off ghostly babble of voices, the shriek of torment, the sickening crunch of bones, the tramp of driven thousands.

"He drew back. Down the valley behind him the chequered fields were brassy with rape blossom, and the cool scent of bean flower blew his way. Far off, by a green thicket of bamboo, a group of men in mist-blue cotton garments were singing at their work. From willow to willow a kingfisher flashed. He saw its jewelled breast reflected in the stream beneath and his soul went out of him and with it in delighted laughter. But his way was down among the hordes of tortured dead. He brushed for the last time his face against a branch of peach blossom darkened with rain, and entered the cave.

"The light in there was grey and smelled

of blood. There was another, a lustful smell he knew and shuddered at, for here it was cold and stale and without delight. He went on down the oozing path toward the court of King Yen Lo.

IV

"This Yen Lo had been a warrior monarch of Northern India. He had never been defeated. But there came a moment when defeat threatened, and he swore that, victory gained, he would go voluntarily to Yin Shih in the flesh. The Immortals came riding their white dragons down the sky to hear his oath; Yen Lo repeated it, striking one iron-dark hand within the other. At once a million warriors and eighteen generals sprang frightfully from the ground. The battle was soon done; Yen Lo the victor. So, undefeated, still in his unpierced cuirass of rhinoceros hide, he accepted the dominion of shades.

"There the Taoist T'ung Yu found him, sombre and proud on his throne, vast treasuries of spirit money all in the shape of silver shoes at his back. A multitude of demons, scenting live blood, came grimacing horridly

to drive the necromancer out, but he made a secret sign that stopped them in their tracks.

"'Show me your books!' he said to King Yen Lo.

"The sombre monarch glanced at him indifferently, noting the symbols worked about his dress.

"'Bring out the books,' he said and slumbered.

"The demons leaped into the darkness beyond the throne, and staggered out again laden with huge volumes neatly written. Now and then as they passed him they attempted to pinch T'ung Yu's stout limbs, for they were bored with tormenting disembodied shades whose thin mental cries were savourless. But T'ung Yu turned on them with narrowed eyes and made a gesture he had learned, and they receded yelping into the farther dark.

"The necromancer pored over the heaped volumes of the judged; up and down the columns right to left, right to left, the name, the crimes, the punishment assigned. At

length he lifted his head and wiped the sweat wearily from his face.

"'I do not find the name I seek,' he said.

"Yen Lo awoke.

"'I am curious,' he remarked, 'to know what mortal is worth these pains.'

"T'ung Yu closed a volume and sat down on it.

"'Her worth does not concern me,' he returned. 'It is the worth of him who seeks her that impels my quest.'

"Yen Lo raised astounded eyebrows.

"'A woman?' he exclaimed. 'But surely there is no dearth of women up above!' He chuckled. 'When I was there, there was not. And all of them made alike. I tell you I was frantically bored in time. There were so few things one could do with them. I tried all kinds, some learned in devious matters, some quite unpractised. But they taught me, or I taught them, the same things. Dull! Dull!' He leaned confidentially toward T'ung Yu. 'The pæderasts who come here.... Sometimes I feel a sympathy, al-

most an envy of them. At least they got a change. Huan, Duke of T'si, who came down nearly two thousand years ago, told me his harem was both male and female. His enterprise interested me, but you should see him now, a flaccid, haggard ghost. His punishment, of course, was more of the same.'

"There was a pause.

"'But perhaps,' suggested Yen Lo, 'your master never knew this woman. The mind is sometimes tormented by an itching for the unattainable.'

"T'ung Yu rose and looked wearily at the piles of books he had not yet examined.

"'He possessed her for nearly twenty years,' he said.

"Yen Lo threw himself backward in an attitude of astonishment.

"'Incredible!' he cried. 'She must be old! Naturally I would not have noticed her. Besides, we get so many.'

"The necromancer stood a moment glaring at the demons, who gibbered gleefully in

return as they brought out more and more of the musty chronicles of the damned, and threw them on the heaps about him. He turned his back on them.

"'I think,' said T'ung Yu, 'that if you will allow it, I will seek her out personally. These interminable records daunt me.'

"'By all means,' assented Yen Lo courteously, 'if your courage is greater than your patience. Shall I assign you a guide?'

"The necromancer bowed perfunctorily, his worried eyes on the darkness beyond.

"'I'll go alone,' he decided.

V

"THROUGH successive hells the necromancer went, hiding his face at moments in his sleeve, scrutinising a multitude of dim distorted faces that grinned and shuddered in some torment they alone understood. Everywhere was the cold stale smell of lust. T'ung Yu could not shake his nostrils free of it.

"There was no colour anywhere. The Taoist remembered the kingfisher's flight, the group of men by the bamboo grove, the shining fields of red earth and their yellow bloom. He moaned with desire of it.

"A shadow in the shadows called his name.

"'Take this away,' it groaned, 'this ghastly clinging at my loins.'

"T'ung Yu looked down and saw the sweating limbs.

"'How can I help,' he said. 'You brought it with you. Time was you sought it.'

"He hurried on. The lowest hell lies 10,-

ooo *li* below the slime of the deepest ocean. Here were no demons, horned with gaping teeth. But each man had a mirror in which he saw himself. Incessantly they tried to turn these on their fellows. But the dark intervened.

"T'ung Yu stopped curiously beside one who twisted this way and that to avoid the mirror that swung round to confront him.

"'What did you do on earth,' he asked, 'that you are here?'

"For the man had a face of conscious nobility.

"'Nothing!' protested the other earnestly, 'I did nothing wrong. Indeed I strove with wrongdoers to convict them of their evil ways. Many went and hid themselves, and many killed themselves for shame. My own actions were open to all the world, and above reproach. In life I was respected and feared.'

"T'ung Yu was puzzled, for he knew that in hell men speak the truth, having nothing to lose by it. Above, in lesser hells, he had seen hypocrites, butchers, and maimers,

patricides and fornicators. These had killed the bodies of others; polluted their own. These in this hell, it seemed, had only maimed the souls of men. Secure in their own righteousness, they had made others see themselves as vile, building their pride on such ruins.

"'How long must you remain here?' T'ung Yu inquired.

"'Until we realise that these mirrors show the truth,' groaned the other.

"The Taoist glanced at the mirror that hung before the man and leaped aside with an instant yell of fear. For the mirrors of hell are terrible; they show not what a man has done, but what he is, this thing that no one knows on earth."

"And still no sign of Yang Kuei-fei?" Li Mu interrupted the poet. He had grown more and more uneasy as the depths of hell were searched and she not found.

"No sign," said Chiao Sui. "But no one stays forever in the Nether World. Sometimes the pains are sharp and quickly over.

"T'ung Yu, escaping from the maimers of souls in a sweat of terror, waded out into the Nether Sea. This could be felt but scarcely seen, for no star hung above it. T'ung Yu also was puzzled that he had not found Kuei-fei. He had searched with special care among the adulteresses.

"But as the cold sea struck his throat he remembered what Yen Lo had told him, when, seeing the indolent monarch compose himself for sleep again, he had ventured on polite condolence.

"'It must be very wearying for you to judge the souls of so many.'

"'Not at all,' had murmured the infernal king; 'they mostly judge themselves. The worst of hell is the heightened self-realisation that comes to those who are sent here. In their bodiless state they have no protection against it. But even if they refuse to admit their deserts we have a way of catching them. You see those bridges?'

"T'ung Yu had looked. Nine bridges hung across the road: the first of jade and

jewels, the second of marble, and so down to a rough plank of wood.

"'The jade bridge leads straight to the lowest hell. But those who creep over the plank soon find themselves on earth again re-born. There is punishment at the end of the marble bridge, but it is short and sharp, and afterwards comes reward.'

"T'ung Yu reflected on this as he stood numb in the dank waters of the Nether Sea. Had Yang Kuei-fei stepped on a favourable bridge? He shook his head. Not an adulteress! And yet, he had searched all the rooms of hell.

"With that he laid his fingers strangely in his palm, dived through an inky cave, and rose like a fish through the water. He lifted at last through the weed-green twilight of the upper sea, and came out facing a livid sky with a blood-red smear along its eastern edge. He knew himself to be in the Jade Grey Sea that lies to the east of the Middle Kingdom. There to the left of him floated the Purple Islands of the Blest, and there..."

Chiao Sui paused as Chü-i approached, the familiar white silk untidily rolled in his hand.

"It is finished," said the boy to Li Mu, and sank down wearily on the bamboo mat, drawing his sleeve across his moist face.

"May we hear it now, my brother?" Li Mu spoke breathlessly.

Chü-i glanced at the rumpled silk he had dropped heedlessly on the ground. It is said that the first glance of mothers at their newborn babies is often — sentimental tradition to the contrary — similarly tinged with fatigue and reluctance.

Li Mu was faintly shocked. He lifted the writing and smoothed it reverently out on the table. Chü-i turned to him an expression half gratitude, half apology.

"I suppose I'll like it later," he admitted, "but just now I'm sure it must be bad, and I can't remember what it's all about."

"It's about Yang Kuei-fei!" Li Mu reminded him joyously.

Chü-i took the silk, read a few lines and looked up inspirited.

"If the honourable company will deign to listen, I will read," he said, and forthwith began to chant the concluding verses of "The Everlasting Wrong."

The Islands of P'êng Lai.

The Taoist suddenly hears of the island hills of the Blessèd,
Suspended in nothingness, far in a region of dazzling blue.
There are pavilions like gems, and the five-coloured clouds of joy;
There slowly, in infinite ease, Immortals like flowers are walking.

The Taoist Visits Kuei-fei's House There.

In the midst of these is a person known by the name of T'ai Chên,*
Her face is white as a blossom; before her is beauty abashed.
To the west of the Gold Palace pillars he knocks at the jade door bar,
And gives the jewel-maid word for her doubly beautiful mistress.

She is Agitated at his Coming.

When she in the nine-flowered bed had learned of the envoy's coming
With word from the great Han lord, her soul started up from its dreaming.
She pushed back her pillow and reached for her clothes with trembling fingers;
The silver hook was unlatched from the pearl door-screen for her rising.

* T'ai Chên was the name taken by Yang Kuei-fei during her retirement in a Taoist nunnery.

She Hurries to meet Him.

Her cloudy hair on one side, her eyes still drooping with sleep,
As she hurried down the hall her flower-cap was awry.
Her immortal sleeves caught the wind, their embroideries were whirled by the breeze.
At once she seemed to be dancing to the Rainbow Feather tune.

She Restrains Her Emotion.

But her jade face was still; her tears were very few,
They lay on her cheeks like rain in spring on blossoms of the pear.
Quietly speaking, not weeping, she thanks the pre-eminent monarch;
His voice and his face are now like the dazzle of light on the ocean.

She is Faithful to the Emperor.

Cruel the cutting short of their love in Chao Yang pavilions;
But days and nights are many; she waits him in P'êng Lai Palace.
She turns her head and gazes down to the place of earth,
She cannot see Ch'ang An for the dust and mist that obscure it.

And Brings Love Tokens

But there are the precious things, the proof of their ancient passion;
The golden box, the hair pins, she gives the priest at his leaving.

to be Delivered.

She keeps one half the pin, a fragment of the box;
She splits the yellow gold, and breaks in two the hair pin.

With a Rhyme for the Emperor's Hearing.

"O tell him that my heart is stable like the gold,
Tell him that Heaven will yet see us again together!"
Urgently at his going she speaks a rhyme for the monarch.
In the heart of the rhyme was a pledge that they two understood.

The Pledge.

"In the seventh moon on the seventh day in Ch'ang Shêng Hall,
At the division of night in the moment of secret words,
We longed to unite in the sky like those birds with one wing only,*
And on earth we promised to live like trees with their branches twining." †

The Poet's Comment.

Heaven is long, and earth. Both will at last be extinguished.
But this great wrong shall endure; its memory shall be eternal.

* These birds have each only one wing, and thus can fly only when joined together.

† These are the trees that "live by the rule of joining." They originally came together over the graves of two separated lovers.

When the poem was finished Li Mu touched Chü-i's sleeve.

"My poet brother is like the hermit Li Yi, who spoke and the sky followed," he said softly.

"Li Yi travelled without boundaries, and he was friendly with ghosts," Li Kuei-nien completed the classical reference.

But the young poet's eyes were on his senior, Chiao Sui.

Chiao Sui considered a moment. "It is a good poem for a narrative ballad," he said at last. "It is long, as well, and that must be taken into account. The mind must have strong wings that traverses so wide a country. You will write more poems, Chü-i, and they will be good."

Chü-i having made the obeisances proper to his gratitude, settled back, content and fatigued, on the mat. Then he remembered Chuang, and looked across at him apologetically. But the scholar's smile was warm. "It is good work," he said, "you will serve the Emperor long and well, I trust."

After a moment he continued more particularly.

"This piece of work is like a trinket of filigree. The materials to the craftsman's hand were good: gold and silver, precious and semi-precious stones. He chose, he cut and shaped, drawing out the gold and silver threads into a pattern that was in his mind. The making of such trinkets is not like the bitterness experienced by the creative poet, who draws gossamer thought from his consciousness as a spider spins a strong and glistening web from her own belly. Yet one of the world's great pleasures is the appreciation of craftsmanship."

He smiled, and Chiao Sui, who had been watching the shadow of the moon in his wine cup, and pursuing his own thoughts, spoke a trifle argumentatively.

"There are those who assert that it was not in P'êng Lai that the Bright Emperor found Kuei-fei," he said; "I for one agree. She may have been there at some time; I believe she was, just as I believe she must

have expiated her sin with An Lu-shan in some dark, lust-weary room in hell. But one does not conceive of her as resting eternally satisfied in a pure contemplation of sensuous beauty; nor the Emperor, neither."

"It is said the necromancer sought her in the moon," suggested Li Mu.

"In time he did," Chiao Sui agreed, "but first he searched the Jade Grey Sea in vain as I shall tell...."

VI

"When the Taoist emerged from the darkness of the World below the Sea, he floated a while idly in the water, taking pleasure in the sight again of the pale green sky of morning. But a vicious snap at his legs made him leap aside, and turn to confront a range of ragged teeth. A whale hung under the surface, supporting with others a floating mountain. Now all the whales glared at him with little resentful eyes. He swam round the lashing tail of one and chambered on the land.

"For a time he stood astonished, knowing himself to be on one of the Purple Islands of P'êng Lai, in the Jade Grey Sea to the east of the Central Kingdom. The hill sides that rose upward from the shore were massed with the pale mauve flowers of immortality. A thousand years ago the Emperor Shih Huang Ti sent galleys of youths and maidens out to

pluck this flower for him. They never returned.

"In the centre of the island stood a great rock of jade, a thousand *chang* in height, and from it leaped a fountain of sweet wine. T'ung Yu knew of this fountain. Whoever drinks of it becomes suddenly inebriated, and gains eternal life. He began climbing toward it.

"On the way his attention was diverted by the sound of flutes, and phœnixes came wheeling from the sky. These birds were coloured blue and red and yellow and had a silver crest on their heads. To the music they began a measured gambolling among the immortal flowers and sang surpassingly. Their glittering tails spread like those of peacocks, and their coral talons were rhythmically raised and set.

"T'ung Yu looked for the flautists, and saw a group of delighted people. These were beautiful. They had faces the colour of burnished gold; their voices were like brass cymbals lightly struck.

"T'ung Yu remained many days on this island, surprised at what he saw. The people looked at him without approval, but without dislike. All that he asked they told him, then looked another way. He learned much about them.

"They cared for nothing but the beauty that could be seen or touched or heard. There may have been two sexes among them, but T'ung Yu saw no clear evidence of this. In spite of the freedom with which they approached each other, he saw no manifestations of attachment or desire. Yet often one, at sight of another, would fall into a trance of delight.

"They took great pleasure in the garments they wore, for which they gathered petals of all colours, drew in the silken sheen of the sea when there was moonlight, and dragged down rainbows for weaving. Sometimes they would shred a rainbow to use for their embroideries. For these they also used silver strands of rain, and by means of a screen placed against the sun and cunningly pierced,

they made the gold threads they needed. The garments they made thus looked well on their copper-coloured bodies that were smooth and flawless and yet subtly varied so that no two were alike. T'ung Yu would have been well content to watch this charming variety had he not had in his blood that which made him alien to the island, the desire to possess, and destroy if need be in possessing.

"The lakes on the island were at most times smooth, and these were places of pilgrimage. People could be found there at all hours, bent over their own reflections in an admiration that was curiously without vanity.

"Sometimes, gazing at his image in a pool, one dived in straight.

"'He drowns himself?' T'ung Yu had asked. 'But he seemed happy.'

"His neighbour glanced at him surprised.

"'Can Immortals die?' he returned. 'He seeks a stranger beauty for a while. Looking out from under that water, he sees the world

distorted, suiting his mood. Fantastic, dream-like images slide by, and he lies passive, watching them.'

"'Such come to me in sleep,' said T'ung Yu. 'I do not like them. Often they are demons that wake me in a sweat of fear.'

"The other looked at him, and displeasure crossed his face.

"'Not once in a thousand years does any ugly thing come to this island,' he said and moved away.

"T'ung Yu followed him.

"'These demons are necessary,' he persisted; 'they are sent as warnings. For fear of them a man strives harder to be good.'

"The islander heard T'ung Yu's words with a face so blank of understanding and so indifferent, that the Taoist felt for the first time contempt for these blissful ones.

"'They have no moral sense,' he told himself, and lost the diffidence that had oppressed him.

"On days when the wind blew and the surface of the lakes was ruffled, there was no

regret among the islanders. They turned with a happy inconsequence to watch the trees wind-shaken against the sky, the life of sea birds balanced dexterously on the storm, the cloud-shadowed leap of grasses.

"Their pleasure had no end because it was without thought, desire or memory. Each new beauty was a new delight undimmed by shadows of things past or any knowledge. T'ung Yu wondered that they touched each other coolly as a carving is handled; that their desire, if desire it could be called, was wholly in the eyes and finger tips. With T'ung Yu this was not so, though he was puzzled to know which were men and which women.

"At last he approached one who was slighter than the rest, whom he trusted was a woman. Her apparent youth was notable even in the midst of agelessness. She watched him curiously, though with no great pleasure as her eyes ran over his person. He told her she was beautiful. She smiled in agreement, but without the blush, or the coy shrinking which makes young women so alluring.

"The Taoist's breath came hoarsely. No one was in sight. Below the grove in which they stood the ground sloped gently to a cliff above the sea. The grass was thick with mauve flowers.

"The girl was smiling, her pale-golden face tilted a little, her long eyes upon him. She had a peacock of sea-green jade in her hair; her dress was of some silken stuff, coloured rose-gold like the skin of an apricot. T'ung Yu laid a hot hand on the shoulder of her dress. It came off easily and slid to the ground, leaving her quite uncovered. His eyes blurred. Still smiling, she stood a little off from him, and turned slowly as if she had been a golden statuette on a revolving pedestal.

"And still she made no movement of coquetry, even when the Taoist's eyes and hands ran down her cool smooth body. Then suddenly her breath drew in with a hissing noise. T'ung Yu looked up and saw her eyes, cloudless till now, now clouded with bewilderment and fear at what she saw in

his. She slipped out of his hands and ran down the slope lighter than air... and over the edge of the cliff.

"T'ung Yu, panting after her, saw nothing below but the back-curled, mocking lips of the sea.

"Angrily the necromancer stamped his foot five times, and the whales roared with terror and the island shook. The people hid themselves in caves or dived in the sweet-water pools, their bright images broken about them as they struck, and reached a weedy quiet where husky low-voiced dragons comforted them. A wind swept up the hillside and the mauve flowers of immortality bent all one way, shaking their tiny bells.

"A white moon like an empty sphere of glass came out in the sky."

VII

"ANGRILY the necromancer brandished his fly whip five times against the moon, and the white horsetail flew out and lengthened to a bridge across the air. Half-way along the frosty span he paused and looked back irresolutely. He had not searched the island through. Might the Imperial Concubine be somewhere on it, hidden? He shook his mind free of its unease. 'Not the adulteress!' he muttered and smiled wryly.

"As he approached the moon he made out the motionless figure of the moon lady Ch'ang O. She sat white-faced beneath the ghostly Cassia tree. Her hair dropped straight and gathered in a pool of blackness round her feet. Not far from her sat the industrious Rabbit of Yin, pounding cinnamon bark in a mortar to make the drug of immortality.

"So much T'ung Yu saw through the thick glassy air that makes a globe about the

desert of the moon. He had then to set his whole attention on himself, for the unattached end of his horse-tail bridge was swaying this way and that in the currents of the upper air, as a strand of seaweed idles in a pool. At length, by throwing his weight from one side to the other, he forced it round until it touched the glassy sphere. Then swiftly, lest it slip, he slid through the circumference and found himself on an empty plain that glittered frostily under his feet. Curiously he picked up a handful of the ice-white sand. It melted to a pool of stagnant air in his palm.

"At last he came from this desolation into a series of gorges strewn with pearls like boulders, for pearls are the distilled essence of the moon, the centre of the Yin principle and therefore suited to women. There is a pearl that keeps its own radiance however dark the night. The moon is its prototype. As women and dark and pearls are Yin, as men and light and jade are Yang, so are..."

"But where was Ch'ang O, the Lady of

the Moon?" interrupted Chü-i, fearing a disquisition on Yin with Yang to follow, while T'ung Yu wandered above the earth.

"She had vanished," returned Chiao Sui. "In her place beneath the ghostly Cassia tree there sat a three-legged toad. It turned round eyes of greenish glass on the visitor, and its back glimmered like hoar frost. The Taoist gave back stare for stare, then looked to where a group of women, whose bodies were luminous, whose faces were blind, moved through a forest of trees that were white like coral branching under water. These were the attendants of Ch'ang O.

"'Yang Kuei-fei?' he shouted, and in the empty silence his words fell back on him shattered and tinkling like fragments of glass.

"A dread came over him. The three-legged toad turned its heavy head and looked at him hungrily, wrinkling its hoar-frosted skin.

"A panic such as he had never felt in Yin Shih, a strangeness more remote than P'êng

Lai, prickled the hair on his scalp. Suddenly he saw his own face reflected in the glassy air, and it was white with fear. He began to run backward. Now his face was multiplied. It grimaced inverted above his head; it swept in upon him from both sides; it tripped up his feet.

"At last, throwing both arms across his eyes he fell, and lay inert on the hard surface of the sky.

"The moon rolled past him."

VIII

"The thin live air of heaven waked the necromancer from his trance. The surface on which he lay was smooth and polished, and of a deep dark blue. All about him were sparkling points of light as if the celebrated dancer Golden Lily Feet had been that way, leaving the imprint of the flowers which, as history relates, were embossed on the soles of her tiny shoes.

"At a little distance there flowed a broad and shallow stream. This was the River of Heaven, which, as all men know, flows obliquely across the sky to the far western mountains of the earth where it becomes our Yellow River, the Hoang Ho.

"T'ung Yu rose and hurried that way. It was deeper than it seemed; he dared not try to ford it, and stumbled, footsore and discouraged, along its bank. Its stones were pearls and fragments of crystal that cut the felt soles of his shoes. He was leaving a

bloody track behind him when at last he came in sight of the Weaving Maiden. Her hands had fallen from her star-pointed loom, and her steadfast eyes were fixed on the Herd Boy, who tended his flocks in a meadow full of jonquils on the other side of the stream.

"'Where is Kuei-fei,' the necromancer asked her. 'Where is the Shining One, beloved by the Lord of all below the Sky?'

"The Weaving Maiden looked at him and her eyes darkened. 'You seek the woman whose lover stood by and watched the spirit struggle out of her throat?' she asked, and turned away her head without waiting for reply.

"T'ung Yu's face tensed with anger and the pain of his lacerated feet. He brandished his fly-whip at her till she was forced to look at him.

"'O least among the Immortals,' he raged, 'dependent on a shaking bridge of wings to know the embrace of your Herd Boy once a year, dare you, a woman, question the deeds

of the Son of Heaven, whose brother is the Sun, whose sister is the Moon, whose sceptre rules the earth?'

"The Weaving Maiden regarded him calmly.

"'My woman's wit is equal to this: the Princely Lover let her die and lived himself.'

"'Since when he has lived in death, in search of the dead, desiring death,' returned the necromancer, putting down his fly-whip.

"The Weaving Maiden reflected a while, looking in the stream.

"'Well, he must die to win her,' she said at last. 'Go back to the Flowery Central Kingdom. Ask him if he is willing to purge his flesh among the shades in Yin Shih, to purify his emotions in P'êng Lai, to brave the white terror of the icy moon.'

"'What then?'

"'Then he may find her in the Paradise of Tao Li, in the K'un Lun mountains to the west.'

"T'ung Yu followed with his eyes the flow of the Heavenly River down the sky to the

jagged blue peaks that mark the western edge of the world.

"'You will know the country of Hsi Wang Mu?' enquired the Weaving Maiden in a kinder voice, for she had been peering through the crystalline floor of the sky to the region of yellow dust below. She had seen there an old man wandering with distracted face, his imperial garments torn.

"T'ung Yu nodded. 'I will know it,' he said, and quoted the description by Huai Nan Tzu, 'On the west there are the tree of pearls, the tree of jade, the tree of the *sua* gem, and the tree of immortality. On the east are trees of chrysoprase and jade. There flows the yellow water three times round and returns to its source. It is the *tan* water of immortality. There the weak water issues from a rock and flows into the moving sands.'

"The Weaving Maiden assented.

"'The mountain of Hsi Wang Mu is very high,' she said, 'round its base flow four rivers; the blue river, the white river, the

red river and the black. Within their circles the mountain rises 10,000 li in circumference, 11,000 li in height. On it stand five towers built of the five colours of jade. In one of them the Shining One you seek can be found, chief among the ladies of Hsi Wang Mu.'

IX

"T'UNG YU made no acknowledgment to the Weaving Maiden, for when he turned to do so he saw she had forgotten him. Her hands had returned to their work within the starry framework of her loom, weaving the fluffy down that moulting dragons leave about the sky. Her eyes were not on her work. They sought those of the Herd Boy on the other bank of the stream.

"The necromancer therefore turned and followed the course of the Heavenly River. The pebbles of pearl and crystal rattled under his feet. Once, tempted by avarice, he bent down and filled his sleeves and satchel with them. But in the pure thin air of heaven even his flesh was a burden to him; his bones were almost more than he could lift. He threw away the pebbles and went on empty-handed.

"The mountains of K'un Lun were iris

purple as he came down among them. He lost his way in a forest of chrysoprase, and wandered a long time there. The light came softly through carved leaves of jade. Silver *ch'i lin*, a single twisted horn of ivory on their foreheads, walked delicately past him. Now and then a Fêng-Huang bird, that is both male and female, lighted on a branch of pale green stone to preen its sunset coloured wings. One, without seeing him, began to sing, and the necromancer stood transfixed, as if in his turn he had become carven stone. He could not move again till it had ceased, then went on dreaming of the heavenly sounds.

"At the foot of the Tortoise mountain he came upon the Lake of Gems. In it lay reflected the palace of Hsi Wang Mu, the Western Empress Mother, and above it, up and up, rose the Five Towers of Jade. Trembling, the Taoist approached the Tree of Life, that is 10,000 cubits in height and three hundred arms' span round the trunk, carved of a single piece of clear white jade.

In it the bird messengers of Hsi Wang Mu were nesting. They had wings blue as water.

"Beneath this tree sat Hsi Wang Mu herself, and the necromancer who till now had felt anger, fear, curiosity, wonder, but never awe, dropped without willing it to the ground to make the *k'o tou* of reverence. He could not call her beautiful. Indeed her face could hardly be distinguished for the light that filled it. About her was a great crowd; their bodies were clear as amber or crystal. The clothes they wore, embroidered in a hundred colours, could not hide the brightness of them.

"No one looked his way, and T'ung Yu, prostrate with his forehead on the ground, became intolerably aware of himself. His own flesh stank, putrescent in his nostrils; the brain within his skull he knew for a grey horror of crawling thoughts. He remembered hell with longing; the Jade Grey Sea with regret; his desire was even toward the moon. Past them all he had strutted, the magic fly-whip in his hand,

unpurged. Not pain had touched him, nor restraint. He had fled from terror and had mocked the steadfast love that spanned the Heavenly River. And now his very clothes befouled the earth on which he lay.

"Daring to lift shamed eyes to the serene group before him he saw one move from among them and seat herself at the feet of Hsi Wang Mu. It was Yang Kuei-fei. She took from a bowl one of the peaches of immortality which grow in that country, divided it, and flung the stone far out and down toward the earth.

"'It will take root and grow there as a reminder to him I left behind,' she said; 'I think it will bear flowers, if not fruit.'

"The Western Empress Mother reproved her, smiling. 'That tree will be invisible to most,' she said.

"'While there are poets, they will remember and seek it,' returned Kuei-fei serenely, 'and it will comfort him who knew me. O, I could weep for all he must pass before he comes here.'

"Shame stopped the necromancer's ears. He remembered that he had had it in mind to toss his fly-whip once again across the air to make a bridge for the Emperor to cross above the Nether World, away from the Jade Grey Sea, safe from the icy terrors of the moon. The thought was a scorpion in his inmost body. What! Bring the Emperor here to dissolve in his own foulness unpurged! An ill service to one whom he owed loyalty.

"T'ung Yu turned and began to crawl flat as a snake through the immortal grasses. As he went they smelled a little sweet. Their scent broke through his own appalling stench that stopped his nostrils."

Chiao Sui put down his wine cup and stared into the moonlit courtyard. It seemed full of verses painted on white silk; inked characters no one could read. A bird moved in the branch above their heads, half waked, and went to sleep again.

"No more?" cried Li Mu plaintively. "Can you not tell us how at last they met,

and lived in eternal happiness and love?"

The poet was silent, but Chuang spoke.

"Who can describe the shuddering ecstasy with which two spirits, purified at last, at last re-find each other?" he murmured. "Known, it cannot be spoken of."

"Meanwhile what groping in blind by-ways soon abandoned," Chiao Sui continued his friend's thought. "How dare the wisest judge the lusts of others? Who knows what desire of a better thing impels them? Even Kuei-fei in the arms of An Lu-shan . . ."

Li Mu made a sharp gesture of repugnance.

Chiao Sui looked at the boy's averted head and did not misunderstand him. "You are very young, my son, and the young are prone to confuse abstinence with purity."

Li Mu turned on him rebelliously and the poet added:

"Doubtless they are often inseparable, especially in youth, but maturity can sometimes win through to the one, the more desirable, only by sacrificing the other."

The two boys looked at him with close set faces, and Chiao Sui, somewhat confused at finding his platitude taken for heresy, blundered on with an abrupt gesture.

"However I speak generally. I do not defend Kuei-fei. No doubt she was a wanton."

This was worse. The young faces across the table hardened. Chuang, rubbing his chin in perplexity, wondering how to soothe the painful confusion of concrete rules and nebulous worship in the boys' minds, put in a conciliating word.

"It is not necessary," he said, "for you to accept untried my honoured friend's subtleties. Knowledge of the urgent inconsequences of the human heart may come to you in time."

Chü-i recovered his poise.

"We are honoured in having heard the conjectures of the most revered elder poet," he said politely. "Much has been learned of the Shining One's life on earth, where her beauty was supreme and perfect. And

beauty is good. The elder scholar at least concurs in this?" He turned to Chuang, who made a smiling gesture of agreement. "Therefore it is established that those in the market place who cannot lift their eyes from threading cash, the moralists mumbling their books, are wrong. Such beauty could not be wicked."

Chuang moved restlessly.

"Such evasions as these are an invitation to sorrow," he said. "Let us speak if you will of the earthly Yang Kuei-fei. Truth bears not one name only. Those who count their square-holed cash are right; Kuei-fei's extravagance at Ch'ang An beggared whole districts and starved the poor. The moralists also are right; unchastity is an ugly sin in a woman. My poet brother is right; beauty is a precious thing, and a thing apart. The wise keep their eyes clear to see it."

"What do you see in her, honourable Chuang?"

"I see a woman with a gift greater than herself, the power to loosen dreams from

their deep roots and set them afloat on any wind that touched her."

Li Mu made a quick gesture toward the guttering candle, to frighten from it a night moth. The insect lighted on the uplifted trunk of the bronze elephant which served as candle stick. Perceiving that silence had followed his interruption, the youth explained diffidently.

"I could not let him destroy himself. See how charmingly he is painted."

The moth opened and closed his wings to show their copper-dusted surfaces, then blundered heavily toward the candle flame again. Chü-i reached down quickly and snuffed it with his fingers.

"You are right, Li Mu, it must not be destroyed. It is a symbol of night as Kuei-fei of love."

"And so," said Chuang — they could not see his smile but heard it — "having glimpsed them for a moment in the light, we send them back again into obscurity, lest..."

"You mock again, most learned brother," broke in the thickened voice of Chiao Sui. He added petulantly, "Does no one sleep in this illustrious company?"

"Kuei-nien has long been sleeping," said Li Mu, slipping his arm under the old man's shoulders to wake and help him to his feet.

"I will stay here," said Chiao Sui, grinning sleepily up at them, "for I am far too drunk to rise."

"And I remain with you, my friend. The night is warm." Chuang gestured his good night to the others, settled his back against the trunk of the Cassia tree, and folded his hands in his sleeves for slumber.

Thereafter there was silence. The moon dipped down behind Flower Mountain, the wind stirred in the Cassia tree, and blew its perfume and a few ghostly yellow petals after the three — two youths, and between them a tired old man — who went down the deserted courtyard toward the inn at the gate.

THE END

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